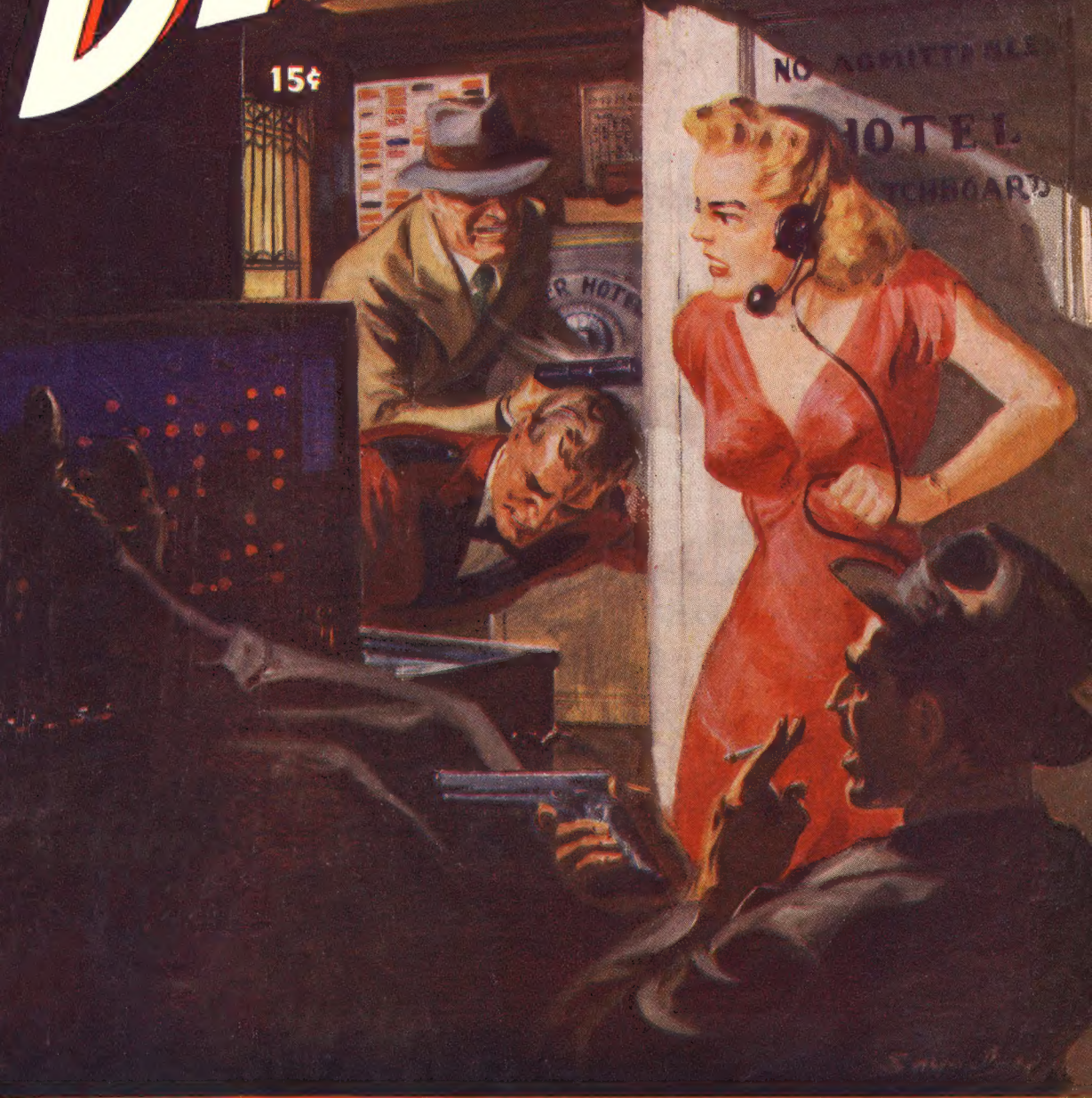


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THE CRIME OF MY LIFE by G. T. Fleming-Roberts

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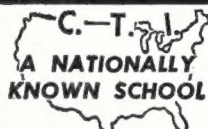
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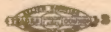
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Cover by Norman Saunders

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The Crime of My Life

NETTLETON DETECTIVE BUREAU
Room 234

Hoosier Trust Building
Indianapolis, Indiana

Wednesday, Sept. 15

Miss Julia Merritt
Hotel Delaney
Chicago, Illinois

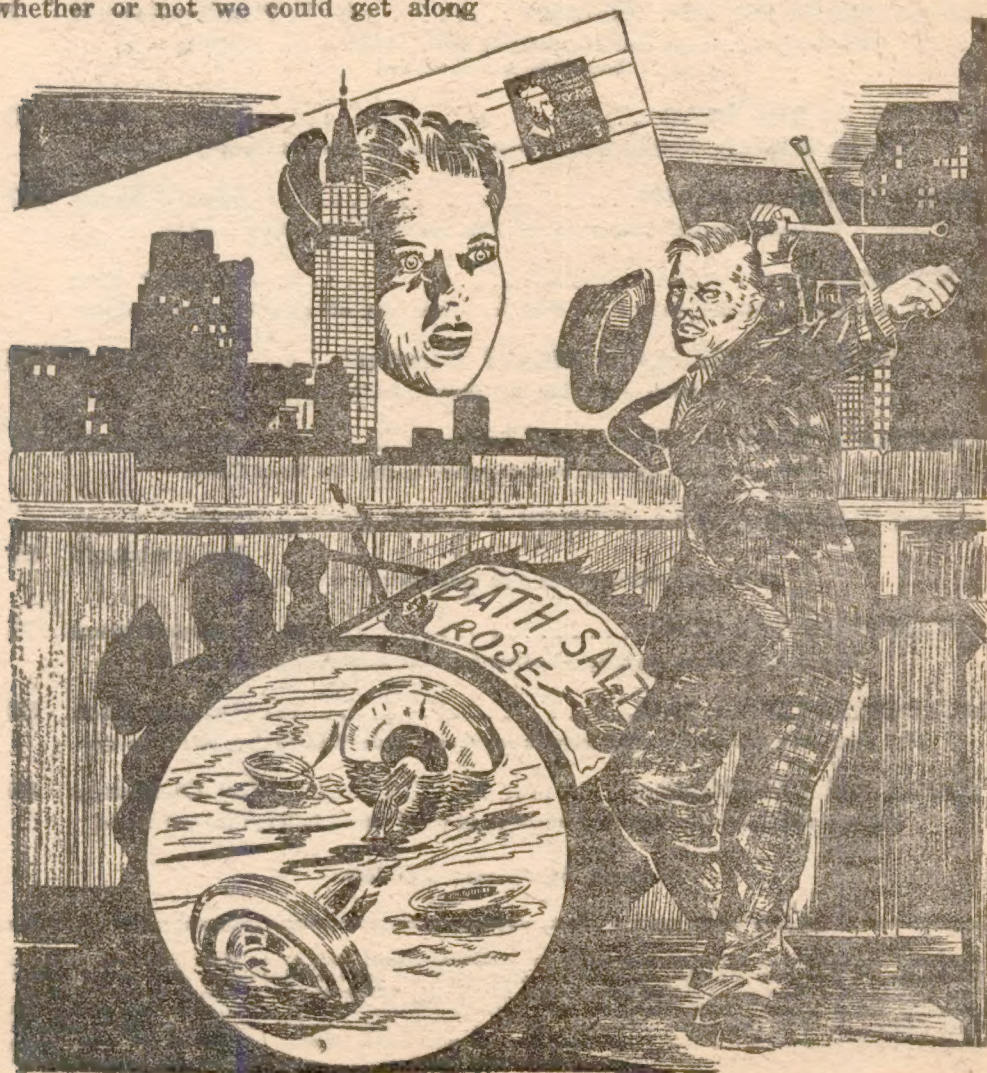
DEAREST JULIE:

Only a little more than an hour ago we were saying good-by at Maple Road Station. I keep telling myself it's okay, that it was as much my idea as yours to see whether or not we could get along

without each other for a couple of weeks. But let me say right now that I am not getting along any too well.

Julie, something is bothering me.

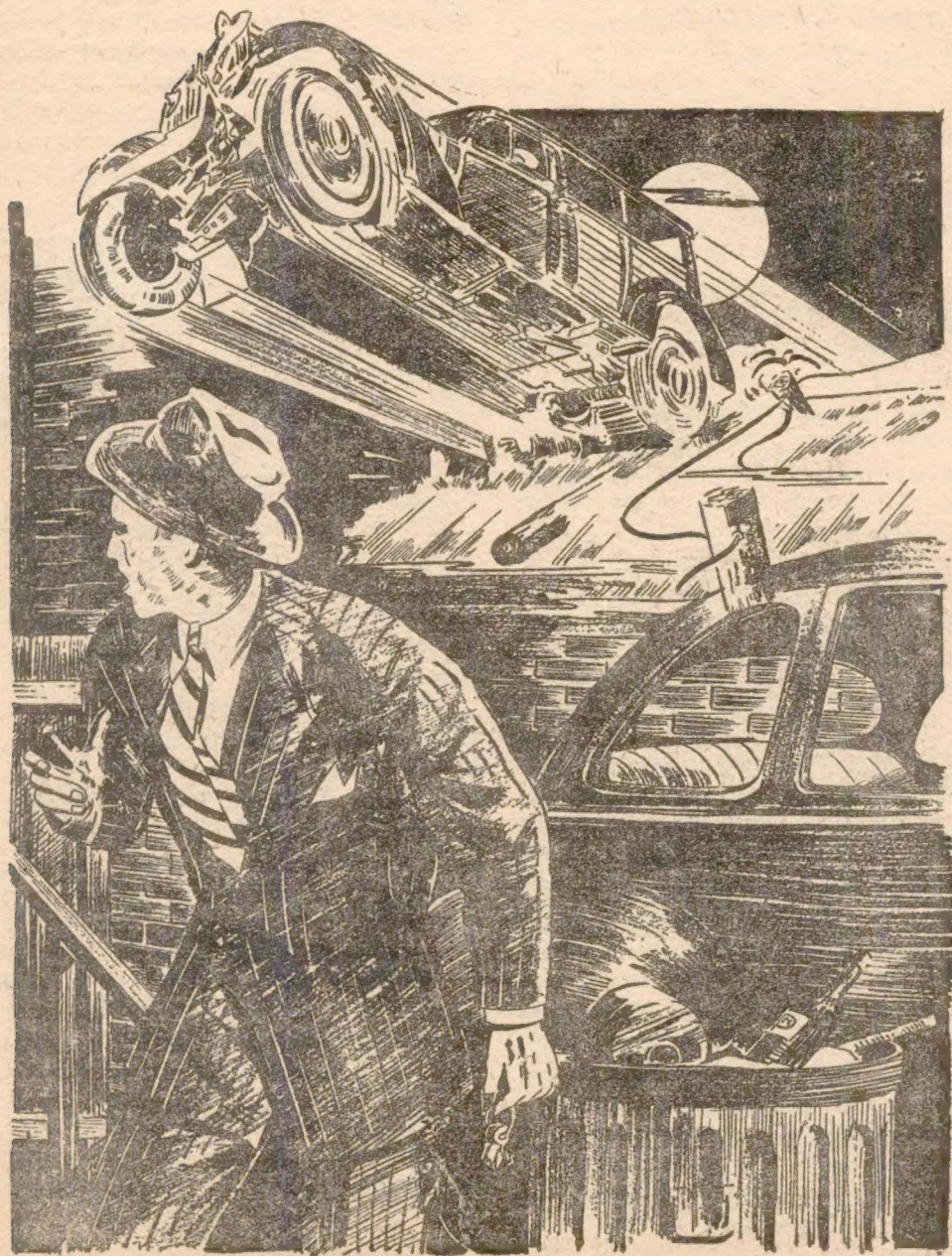
Muffins? No, Muffins is fine. I came here to your apartment directly from the station and let Muffins out for a prow. Contrary to my gloomy expectations, she came back. Right now she is crouched down on her cushion watching me out of half-closed and, I think, contemptuous eyes as though maybe she'd like to say: "You big lug, why don't you stop beating Ju-



It was amazing, the way Detective Jim Nettleton, going out on a harmless summons case, got snarled up in an incredible double murder. But homicide can pop up in the most unexpected places—yet Jim certainly didn't know it was going to pop out of his back pocket.

Baffling Detective Novelet

By G. T. Fleming-Roberts



lie's portable, go on home, and let a cat cat-nap?"

So it isn't Muffins, and it isn't that the drain of your bathtub seems to be stopped up—that I rather like; I can go into the bathroom and get the impression that you've just stepped out of the tub, the sweet scent of you lingering, and that pretty soon you'll come out of the bedroom in something frothy and a bit daring.

Maybe it's something you said, just before the train pulled out. "Jim," you said, "I don't know whether I could stand the strain of being married to a private detective."

Not so much what you said as the time you picked to say it. As though, womanlike, you had to have the last word. Something so final about it, like a single well-placed shot of a gun.

Look, darling; Hollywood has misled you. You've got some wrong conceptions about this detective racket. I can truthfully state that I have never been on the receiving end of a blackjack. I have a gun and a permit to carry same, but the gun, I think, is somewhere in my trunk at Mrs. Hollis' along with a pair of snowshoes I picked up at an auction sale.

The nearest thing to physical danger I've encountered in five years occurred during a raid on a love-nest plant when the wayward husband hit me with the lady's girdle, and even then I am not sure he wasn't aiming at the photographer I'd brought along.

I would like to point out, Julie, that our nuptial chamber—if ever—isn't likely to be cluttered with bodies other than the conventional number, both alive. I have never been in on a murder investigation. If I ever stumble over a corpse, I'll go to the nearest phone, call the cops, and let them handle it.

If I ever stumble over a corpse.

YOU know, I almost did. Tonight. And my being a private detective had nothing to do with the matter. It could have happened to Arthur Murray. I think I made some vague reference to this, there at the station, as my excuse for being a few minutes late, but I believe I'll go into the details right now so that you'll understand just how impersonal murder can be—if it was murder—and how remotely the whole incident touches the life of a certain private detective currently engaged as body-guard to a cat named Muffins.

I guess I told you I was working up a sideline as process server—not a good role for Humphrey Bogart or Robert Montgomery, but it's beginning to make my creditors more amiable. I've let it get nosed around that Nettleton, for a fee, can sometimes tag the boy who refuses to be tagged. Like Mr. Jones, we'll call him, who owns a string of drive-ins and has been very successful in avoiding contact with a certain legal document.

Mr. Jones lives across the river from Ravenswood, up out of the high-water area, in a cute little ten- to fourteen-room cottage surrounded by an iron fence with inhospitable-looking spikes on top.

The spikes are not enough. He also has a couple of Great Danes whom I would have to know a whole lot better before I would extend the hand of friendship with any hope of getting it back.

Mr. Jones has been consistently "out of town." A tough baby to serve with a summons. But I have had the place under observation—either one of the operatives or myself—and every evening, shortly after dusk, Mrs. Jones, wearing a big picture hat, white gloves, a light coat, would drive out in a luxurious blue convertible with the top up and one of the Danes riding the cushion beside her.

Last evening, when Ted Sherrin came to relieve me, I hopped in my rental and trailed the Jones car to a

fashionable private club where I would have been about as welcome as a mixed quartet from a leper colony. But I went off to keep my date with beautiful you feeling reasonably sure I'd tap Mr. Jones with that summons within the next twenty-four hours.

This evening everything was the same—the blue convertible, the Dane, the big floppy hat, and the white gloves. I had a different rental, of course, and when the Jones car showed, I eased out from the weeds alongside the road and didn't switch on the lights until I had to.

Maybe you know what the roads are like out there in that district—narrow, full of curves, an occasional drop-off to the river, surfaced with crushed limestone that is not only treacherous under rubber but makes for thick white dust that piles up in front of the headlights.

The Jones car wasn't doing anything spectacular in the way of speed, and I kept a loose tail on it. When it rode onto pavement and I was sure it was headed for the club, I intended to breeze on by and appoint myself a one-man reception committee. What I would do about the dog, I didn't know. I mightn't have to do anything.

But it didn't come to that.

Maybe half a mile beyond the Jones place, headlights shone through the dust my rear wheels were kicking up. I pulled over as far as I could, and a maroon Town and Country job whipped by doing around fifty which, on that road, is just asking for a harp.

DID I mention dust before? I think I did without having any real conception of the word. The Town and Country threw up a white wall in front of me beside which a London pea-souper would look like a sheet of plexiglass. The Jones car was out there somewhere. I hoped it was. It could have slipped into a side

road, doubled back, and picked up my tail, for all I knew.

I began to worry. I groped on, but I groped a little faster. And as the cloud thinned a little I glimpsed a sharp curve just in time to take it this side of heaven. An S-curve, the sign must have said, if there was a sign, because now I was going into the upper loop of it. And right there was the blue convertible broadside to my lights and well over onto the skimpy shoulder.

Twenty feet in front of the radiator was a tall figure in a floppy hat standing with one white-gloved hand on a yellow splinter of pine that represented what had recently been a flimsy guard rail.

The Great Dane was in the car, and my lights struck gold fire from his eyes. When I got out and skirted the side of the convertible to approach Floppy-hat, the dog lunged and I heard the reassuring clink of a choke-chain.

"Something wrong?" I asked. Foolish, of course, but it broke the ice.

Jones glanced at me and then looked back into the darkness beyond the broken guard rail. I got the impression of a large, big-eyed face, pale, probably not as stupid as it appeared hanging out of Mrs. Jones' picture hat.

"My God, that car—"

His gloved hand lifted, drew a white streak across the dark, jumped back to the splintered timber which it clutched as though this was the end of the world.

It could have been. There was that narrow strip of flattened grass, dust-gray, gray-green, oil-streaked, then the ragged lip of broken turf, then nothing at all.

A beautiful spot for a high dive to Hades.

I had my hand in my pocket where I was carrying the summons, but I didn't immediately tag Jones because of the nearly perfect silence that surrounded us, as impressive as

in church. I thought I could hear the faint lapping of water down there somewhere, but I wasn't sure. Not even the chirp of a cricket nor the croak of a frog. The Dane in the convertible had stopped panting.

It was as though the whole night listened for a sound of life. And there was none.

Jones tore the quiet. "Somebody"—I heard him swallow—"better phone."

"Sure," I said. I brought out the summons and touched him with it, which is all you have to do.

He glanced down dazedly, saw what it was in the rays from his headlights. He took it without saying anything, though he pushed compressed lips around over the surface of his teeth.

I said, "Have you got a flashlight to wag down any traffic that might come along? This could turn into a nice pile-up."

He nodded, stumbled to the convertible, cramming the summons into his pocket. I heard him say, "Dammit, Dirk, where's that flashlight?" And the Dane whimpered as though he felt he was being unjustly accused. Then Jones found the light and came back, babbling to me.

"Must be twenty feet down there. These damn fool kids! Couple neckers, I figure, probably drunk. And didn't you hear a shot?"

"Nope." I took the light from him.

"I thought I did. Just before the crash. What a damn fool thing—"

Jones broke off, and there was more of the same kind of silence as the light beam, searching below, picked off segments of two wheels and their tires showing above the muddy water. Chrome and maroon wheels.

The Town and Country job. It had gone over and over down the steep shale embankment, was resting almost completely upside down. There were no bubbles.

"Did you see them go over?" I asked Jones.

"Lord, no!" he said. "They must have passed me four or five minutes ago. I couldn't see anything for the damned dust. But then I heard the crash, and when I saw that rail gone—"

I pushed the light into his hands, started back toward my rented car.

"I'll find a telephone," I called to him. "And you'd better take off Mrs. Jones' hat and coat. Some of our cops are pretty virile young men." Which brought a little color into his face.

I HAD a couple of hundred yards to go to the next house. The Scotch terrier on guard was completely taken in by the nice swatch of imitation tweed I had on, so I had no trouble getting to the door.

I phoned the office of the County Road Patrol, described the nature and location of the accident, gave my name and license number, and beat the first official car back to the scene by three minutes. Jones had flagged down half a dozen other cars so now there was quite a group of excited onlookers and more coming along all the time.

I hung around the fringes. It took the sheriff's emergency crew close to twenty minutes to extricate a man and a woman, both in their late fifties, both dead.

I wasn't any closer to them than I wanted to be, but I got it from somebody who got it from somebody standing close to the coroner's physician that the woman—she'd been driving—had a bullet in her head, and the man was drowned. Something was said about there being a gun in the car. Also a whisky bottle.

The word *murder* was kicked around a lot, with the river-bank jury agreeing that the guy got what he deserved. But it doesn't have to be murder. The guy could have been cleaning his gun. If he really intended to kill her, there's no follow-up to this. No mystery, no trial, no execution. All neat and quick and final.

But I wouldn't know. I had to get to Maple Road Station to put my gal on a train. I don't know whether they got the car up out of the water or not. Maybe tomorrow morning I'll go back to the front page and find out who the two victims were.

Maybe I will. Right now I'm more interested in your bathtub drain. I just went in to have another look at it, but I don't think looking is a very effective means through which to cope with plumbing difficulties.

It's still just a tubful of sweet-smelling water, and I'd probably sit down and write an ode to it except that it is delicately tinted with lavender. Why lavender, I ask you? What was wrong with the rose bath salts I gave you on Monday? I can't find them around here anywhere and am wondering if you took them with you or gave them to the janitor. In fact, I can't find any bath salts at all.

The way I feel tonight, darling, you could be torn between two loves, the one represented by rose bath salts and the other by lavender.

Stick to the rose, won't you, pet?
And good night, my sweetheart.

Jim

NETTLETON DETECTIVE BUREAU
Room 234
Hoosier Trust Building
Indianapolis, Indiana

Thursday, Sept. 16

Miss Julia Merritt
Hotel Delaney
Chicago, Illinois

My darling Julie:

Have I told you recently that I love you?

This I am writing in what I laughingly refer to as my office—the desk space I rent from the firm of Loftus, Meed, and Loftus, Attorneys. This desk space does not include a window, but if I were to get up and momentarily borrow the window that looks down on Washington Street, I would see rain-washed asphalt, shiny as an eel, bright car tracks, and a

variable number of people waiting at the safety zone.

I have borrowed the window several times in the past forty-five minutes, and I have counted the number of people waiting for street cars and trolley buses. The highest number has been six—because of the rain and the late hour—the lowest, one.

There is always one. Nothing which the Street Railways System has to offer seems to satisfy him. He's thin, about medium height, wearing a hat with a droopy brim and a coat that is gray deepening to very dark gray as it absorbs more and more of our climate.

Julie, I am being shadowed. The shoe is on the other foot, and—guess what?—it doesn't pinch, it merely feels like the shoe were on the other foot. Awkward.

Last night, after sealing the letter to you, I hung around your apartment for a while. The place is so full of you, my dear. Your scent everywhere—something called Audacious, isn't it?—and the gay, bold touches of color against quiet elegance. Being there was a little bit like living with you.

The idea of my slamming the door behind me suggested that we'd quarreled, and I didn't like it. I thought up excuses for not going. I coaxed Muffins into the kitchen for a nightcap. I thought maybe I'd have a nightcap myself, out of a different bottle, of course, and was looking for and not finding same when the buzzer sounded.

It was a man. Not a large man, but the way he looked me over I got the impression that he thought I was a large man. His eye finally came to rest on mine, with that steadiness that suggests, but does not absolutely indicate, honesty. He was about thirty-eight, maybe forty, thin-faced, with a thin-lipped, wide-spreading mouth. He took off his hat and smiled.

"Miss Merritt hasn't left on vacation then?" he asked.

I told him you had, that I was the

boy who intends to marry you, and that my current occupation was that of cat-sitter.

"Oh, then you're Nettleton," he said and his thick, smooth black eyebrows made quite a discovery of it. "Brayton. Elmer Brayton, vice-president in charge of material procurement at Wej-Lok Fastener. Perhaps you've heard Miss Merritt speak of me."

I said I had but only because I didn't want him to build up an inferiority complex. The only Wej-Lok big name you've ever mentioned is your bossman, *the* Mr. Landers. Brayton wanted to shake hands, and while we were doing that he kept trying to see around me as though he hadn't taken me too seriously when I'd told him you'd left for Chicago. He said you were a fine girl and I a lucky man—two things I hadn't known up to now!

"I dropped by wondering if she'd heard—but of course she couldn't possibly have—about Mr. Landers?" Brayton was asking me. He drew a deep, noisy breath over exposed lower teeth and looked grave. "Injured in a motor accident tonight. Seriously. In fact, he's dead."

I probably surprised him by not fainting.

"Mrs. Landers too, I understand. Wiped out. Horrible thing. Horrible." Brayton shuddered. "I was on my way to the morgue. Formal identification, you know. The daughter—Landers' stepdaughter, that is—telephoned. Want to do all I can, of course, for poor Edna's sake. She's like a daughter to me, though I've three of my own. Just tots. Calls me Uncle Elmer."

WHILE he kept up this incoherent chatter, he was sidling away from your threshold, sweetheart. I told him to wait a second. If he had a car, I said, I'd ride down to General Hospital with him. He said he wouldn't think of troubling me, and it took me a little while to convince him that, since Mrs. Hollis' fur-

nished rooms are only a short distance from the hospital, he'd be doing me a favor.

I asked him to come in and sit down while I turned out lights, locked windows, and convinced Muffins she wasn't going to have anything more to eat until tomorrow. Brayton didn't sit down but nosed around your living room, impatiently slapping his hat against his thighs.

And just between us cats, did you know that Elmer Brayton's hair is not actually black? He dyes it, darling! Close to the scalp it's either gray or very light blond. Notice sometime.

We left the apartment together, and instead of walking along the hall and out the Delaware Street door, we went down the basement steps, out the back way to the parking lot.

It didn't appear to me as though he'd just "dropped by" as he'd said he had, but I didn't mention the matter. I realize I'm prejudiced against people who dye their hair and also people who talk all the time as though their hands are busy smuggling the rabbit into the hat.

All the way down to General Hospital he kept up that steady flow of patter. When the conversational ball would slow up, I'd let it, and then he'd give it a quick, an almost frantic nudge as though he was afraid of silence.

I knew what his hands were doing—driving the car—but I kept wondering what was turning over in his mind. He was talking about his wonderful wife, his three wonderful little girls, and how wonderful the state of matrimony is—subjects I felt he was well equipped to handle automatically. But what was he thinking about?

We were about three blocks from the hospital when we struck one of those conversational snags I'd been steering for and he'd been avoiding. Right away he struck off on another tangent so far away from the blessings of home life that I wondered if

this wasn't what had been in the back of his mind all along.

"Don't you think it's a mistake, keeping a gun around the house? It certainly wouldn't have happened if he hadn't, would it?"

I had to ask whom he was talking about and what it was that wouldn't have happened.

"Why, Adolph," he said. "Adolph Landers, I told you. He and Mrs. Landers were in the car, and he shot his wife. Cleaning the gun, no doubt—but does one clean a revolver while riding along in the dark?"

One doesn't.

"Or for that matter, Mr. Nettleton," he went on, "would Landers have *deliberately* shot Mrs. Landers while she was driving at high speed along a dangerous road?"

JULIE, I didn't answer. Because up to that moment I hadn't the slightest idea that the couple I'd seen dragged out of the river were your boss and his wife. It gave me a queer, a very unpleasant sensation, like a certain dream I've had recurrently since I left the service.

In my dreams, I'm about half starved and hurrying to line up in front of a steam table with a lot of other guys. There're all sorts of tantalizing odors and heaps of wonderful-looking food. Then suddenly it isn't a cafeteria line-up at all. I've just passed my physical and I'm being sworn into the Marines again. We're at war again, and all hell is spread out before me.

Like I was being sucked into something I knew I wanted no part of.

I had to get out of the car at the hospital, but I didn't have to go in, did I? I didn't *want* to go in. But then I was going in, and I was walking along with Elmer Brayton into the elevator that would carry us to the top floor where the morgue is.

I tried to talk myself out of that crazy feeling I had. This was still something that could have happened to Arthur Murray, I argued. My girl's

boss knocks off his wife, and so what?

This couldn't affect me. I've never been mixed up with murder. Or was this to be the crime of my life?

Maybe tomorrow, Julie, or a month from now, it'll be so what. But last night it wasn't, and it isn't tonight. The only way I can explain it is that you're not here and I'm attaching exaggerated importance to everything that is yours and everything that has touched your life however remotely. You've got into me like strong drink. If I had a little more of you, Julie, I'd be joyously drunk, but right now I'm just maudlin.

It was like that when I stepped into the morgue last night. I felt sorry for everybody, and especially me.

Roll Peterson, from the sheriff's office, was in the corridor on one of the plain oak settees talking quietly to a girl of about twenty-two. She was a pretty little thing with lustrous black hair and eyes like lumps of charcoal, as dull as that, as burned out. Her mouth had that loose, hurt look. As Roll talked to her, she fingered the edge of the white evening wrap she wore over a flame-colored gown and stared at the toe of a gold sandal.

Elmer Brayton stopped. He said gently, "Edna—"

The girl's head jerked up. She was suddenly on her feet, running to him. Her indrawn breath was a sob.

"Oh, Uncle Elmer—" She was in Brayton's arms. She clung to him frantically, face pressed against his thin shoulder. "B—Billy wouldn't come with me," she stammered and started to cry.

"There, there," Brayton said softly, patting her. "Now, honey, just take it easy. Everything is all right."

He wasn't awkward nor helpless about it. He stood there, head tipped back, a gentle smile on his wide mouth, his eyes soft. He looked as though this were an old story to him—a kid crying on his shoulder.

I began to like Brayton. In spite

of the dyed hair and the previous impression of phoniness he'd given me, I found myself liking him.

I went over to where the sheriff's man, Roll Peterson, stood in front of the settee, his hands dangling. Tiredness sat strangely on his huge shoulders. His mouth drooped.

"Helluva thing," he growled.

I nodded toward the girl. "Landers' kid?"

"Mrs. Landers," Roll said. "Landers' stepdaughter. Name of Poole."

"You think the shooting was an accident?" I asked.

"Heil!" Roll blew down his nose. "Right through the temple? No angle? Heil!"

"Landers meant it then, huh?"

"Meant it and didn't give a damn what happened to himself afterwards. He couldn't have known exactly what the car would do, but he must've had a pretty good idea, and he didn't care."

I said, "The way it turned out tears it right off the blotter, nice and neat."

"Yeah," he said moodily. "It's just as well. They never did get along, the girl was telling me."

WE WATCHED Brayton and Edna Poole for a moment. She was whimpering something, and once again I caught the name "Bill—ee" drawn out in anguish.

"Who's Billy?" I asked Roll Peterson in a whisper.

Roll had an obscene suggestion as to what might be a suitable indignity to heap on this Billy person. "William Schuyler the Third, her fiancé. But I guess not anymore. A break for her, though she probably can't see it from here."

I knew what he meant. The Schuylers are *crème de la crème*. I won't say they wouldn't be caught dead in a morgue, but they'd definitely have to be dead. They certainly wouldn't consider knowing anybody related to anybody who got into the deep freeze at the insistence of a killer.

"What's all this to you, Jim?" Roll asked suddenly.

I found him looking at me out of the ends of his eyes and that feeling of being dragged into something I didn't like became acute.

"I'm Mr. Average Bystander," I told him, "with the average amount of curiosity. I'm the guy who reported this thing, remember? I just happened to be out in that neck of the woods, serving a paper."

Roll seemed perfectly satisfied with my answer. I wasn't, without knowing why. He went on over to join Brayton and the girl, and I presume the three of them entered the refrigeration room.

I hadn't any desire to see the bodies. Adolph Landers remained *the* Mr. Landers—short, pillowy, with a small but rather sensuous mouth and an exaggerated opinion as to his own importance—and I didn't think his wearing a sheet would alter the disagreeable impression he made on me. As for Mrs. Landers, I wanted to remember her as she looked that day you pointed her out to me on the Circle—skinny, sallow, thin-lipped. Otherwise, sympathy might distort my vision.

I went into the room where they handle the stuff you can't take with you—clothing and personal articles found in the pockets thereof. An old man who couldn't write without moving his lips was compiling a check list from a heap of sodden masculine garments on the brown linoleum top of a table.

Al Foss, another county cop, was sitting on the corner of the table fingering the material of a dark brown suit, his eyes covetous. He asked me how I'd like to wear hundred-and-fifty dollar tailor-mades as Landers had, and I asked him how he knew I didn't.

Foss said, "Ha-ha," not laughing.

I pointed to a crumpled handkerchief, white where it was not splotted with well-defined blood stains.

"Did he try to staunch the wound after he shot his wife?" I asked.

"Hell no," Foss replied disgustedly. "He had an open cut on the inside of his right forefinger up close to the palm. Got it off a rough edge of a pipe tobacco tin." He spread the handkerchief out on the table. "You can even see the shape of the wound."

That's what I'd noticed—how well-defined the stains were. "How come it didn't run?" I asked.

"Blood won't, once it gets into cloth," Foss replied.

I stared at him. "You want to bet?"

I took out my wallet and put down a buck which I fully expected to lose. Foss said sure he'd bet; he'd give me two to one. He picked up the handkerchief, and I followed him to the lavatory in the corner of the room where a couple of washings with soap and water failed to remove the stains.

"I should know," Foss said as we came back to the table. "At home I hear about it all the time from my wife. During hay fever season, my nose will bleed, see? All my handkerchiefs got bloodstains on them, and they don't come out. Never."

"His socks ran," I pointed out. They were dark blue silk socks with white clocks, and some of the dye had streaked into the white threads.

The old fellow listing garments chuckled. "My socks run too. With me in 'em. When my old lady says 'Git!' she really means git."

I looked at Al Foss. "How long have you been married?"

"Three months," he said, and grinned.

"Well, she'll learn." I started toward the door where I hesitated, my hand on the knob. "Was there any indication that Landers tried to get out of the car after he shot his wife?"

Foss shook his head. "The guess is that he couldn't have. He had a bruise on his head like maybe the car went into a spin right away and threw him around."

I went out, not feeling any better

than when I'd come in. In fact, I felt worse.

I left then and went to bed but didn't get to sleep until long after daybreak. Downtown at noon, I combined breakfast and lunch, then went over to the Hoosier Trust Building to see if I had any pressing business. I didn't. I spent the afternoon and most of the evening making the rounds of the cab offices, talking to dispatchers. It was all leg work, and I hated it.

The skinny guy who has been tailing me this evening is—guess who? You're so right, darling: Elmer Brayton, Wej-Lok's vice-president in charge of material procurement. Funny, too, because I haven't a square inch of material worth procuring.

Except that Mrs. Landers called a taxi at eight-forty last night and rode as far downtown as Sixteenth and Delaware, where she got out in front of a church. The hack driver said he noticed a maroon *Town and Country* job parked on the other side of the street in front of another church.

This town is lousy with churches. You'd think you and I could get into one some Saturday—you with a bouquet and a veil, me with the ring and a pardonable smirk of triumph.

Or would you?

Say yes again, my sweet, even if you have to do so on a picture postcard showing the polar bears in Brookfield Zoo.

As ever,

Jim

Friday, Sept. 17

Miss Julia Merritt
Hotel Delaney
Chicago, Illinois
Dearest Julie:

Your apartment again, your portable, and your stationery as I do not happen to have a letterhead with me. The water has gone down somewhat in your bathtub, leaving a grayish-lavender ring which I will have to do something about when I have done something about the drain. Muffins is fine, though a bit browned off about

her cushion which is on the coffee table and under my hat.

I have not seriously considered using Muffins' cushion as an under-chapeau, though if there is any more funny business with a lug wrench that mightn't be a bad idea.

Yes, I was nearly knocked out. Nearly, I say, still clinging stubbornly to the theory that such things do not actually happen to private detectives east of Hollywood.

But I'll come to that later. Let me lead up to it in time sequence.

Your friend and my shadow, Elmer Brayton, got rained out last night. He must have decided that the business he had with me would keep until fairer weather.

Tonight is fair, Julie. And I am warmer.

This morning I did some leg work and finally found an old lady in the neighborhood of Sixteenth and Delaware who, unlike most old ladies, knows one car from another. She remembered the maroon *Town and Country* parked in front of the church on Wednesday night. In fact, she insists that the same car, or one just like it, used to park there frequently in the evening, though not recently.

I asked if she had ever noticed the driver of the car. She had not—until Wednesday night. She'd gone for a walk around the block about nine o'clock, was on the homeward leg, almost in front of her own door, when a woman crossed the street and got into the *Town and Country*.

In spite of good illumination from the near-by street lamp, my car-conscious old lady could give me only "a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair" description of the woman driver, with emphasis on the rag part.

"A gray classic coat thrown over the shoulders of a matching cutaway suit with the skirt gored in front and back," she said. "A skinny woman. Had on a porkpie hat, dark hair done in a tight bun at the back of her neck."

Mrs. Landers? Well, I checked with

the morgue attendant in regard to the clothing Mrs. Landers had worn when they brought her out of the river. He wasn't sure about the gored skirt, but her suit was three-piece and gray. So it was probably Mrs. Landers.

This afternoon, around three, I hired a car and drove out to the Landers' country place in Williams Creek. I was met at the door by a plump, pleasant-appearing negress who had a suitcase in either hand. She was just leaving. She told me that "Miss Edna" had handed all the servants their walking papers, explaining simply that she wouldn't be able to keep up the establishment.

I couldn't believe that Landers had died broke, what with all the fat government contracts Wej-Lok had landed during the war, and the only explanation seemed to be that he'd failed to do much in the way of providing for his stepdaughter.

Since Edna Poole was not at home, I went back to Broad Ripple, to a taproom there, and between beers I repeatedly spent a nickel in the phone booth, trying to locate the girl. Shortly after six o'clock, the coin box grabbed and held my money, and I was talking to Edna at the Landers' place. She agreed to see me in thirty minutes.

WHEN I got there, Edna Poole opened the door for me. She had on a plain navy blue skirt and a frilly white blouse that accented the dark hair and eyes. She's a tiny thing, but the way she handled herself under circumstances which I think you could call strained, I wasn't particularly aware of her tininess. She took me into Landers' library off the big reception hall and, before we sat down, asked if I'd like to mix cocktails.

"Martinis, I hope?" she asked, leading me back through the door we'd just entered. I said sure, martinis, and she said, "I like them just as dry as you do, Mr. Nettleton."

I trailed her back through the big, silent house and into the kitchen where she showed me the makings. While I performed, she sat on a high stool, her heels hooked on the rounds, elbow on knee, chin on fist, and I noticed that it was all over between her and William Schuyler the Third; there was a narrow streak of white on the finger where the engagement ring had been.

We took the shaker and glasses back into the library which appeared to be the only place in the house where two people could sit on opposite sides of the room and converse without a telephone. I filled her glass and mine, and when we raised them she said:

"Here's to honest toil, and you couldn't possibly use a secretary, could you, Mr. Nettleton?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've never tried."

Edna Poole looked surprised. Hollywood again. Who makes with the wise cracks if the private detective doesn't have a secretary?

"Is it that bad?" I asked.

She took a sip from her glass, then gave me a slow glance. She didn't look as though she'd ever smiled. "There isn't anything. Not for me. I was talking with Mr. Landers' lawyer this afternoon. Had Adolph—I've never been able to call him father—preceded Mother in death, Mother would have inherited everything. But in the event that she died first, his controlling interest in the Wej-Lok company was to be divided among the officers of the firm on the basis of seniority.

"That is, Mr. Brayton will get the greater share, then Mr. Funk, Mr. Keen, and so on. With the block he already had, Mr. Brayton will own the controlling interest. He generously offered to take me under his wing, but I don't want to be under anyone's wing."

She tipped up her glass, drained it, put it down sharply on Mr. Landers' desk. "Not ever," she concluded.

There was a roll of adhesive tape and a small carton of sterile cotton on the desk, and I remembered the cut on Landers' forefinger.

"Isn't there anything else beside the Wej-Lok holdings?" I asked as I got up to refill her glass.

"Very little. He put nearly everything back into the business. Oh, there's this place here and some government bonds, but I'm perfectly willing that the two Landers nephews should cut each other's throats over whatever is left. I can work for a living." She gave me one of those from-down-under looks which was, believe me, Julie, pretty effective. Those slow, dark eyes of hers.

"I can type," she said.

"So can I," I said to forestall any further suggestion that I needed a secretary. I gave her a cigarette, held a light for her, took one myself. "Has the sheriff been bothering you much?"

What I wanted to find out was if any investigator other than myself had stumbled over this business about the stock split-up which put Elmer Brayton in control of Wej-Lok.

"No," she said. "You see, I wasn't here Wednesday night. I was out with—" She broke off, and her lips shaped bitterly.

SHE had been out with William Schuyler the Third, and she didn't want to talk about it. That was all right with me.

I asked, "Have you any idea why Landers should kill your mother? I mean, had there been a quarrel?"

"There was always a quarrel," she said, "but it was never anything that would indicate that that anything like this might happen."

"Kind of a cold war, huh?" I suggested.

"No, not that either. They just let each other alone. When Adolph was at home, Mother kept to her rooms. She hated him, but they kept up appearances. She knew that he had a mistress, but she didn't know that I knew . . ."

Edna Poole let that trickle off. She twirled her glass by its thin stem, her dark eyes in a mood. I didn't say anything.

"He bought things," she went on. "Expensive presents he never took home. I happened to see him one day in a department store, and I followed him around without his knowing about it." She looked suddenly at me. "Would it be possible to find out a person's name from a telephone number without going all through the directory?"

"Sure," I said. "Easy." I stubbed out my cigarette in the tray on the table beside my chair.

"Because once," Edna Poole went on, "Adolph called that woman from the phone here in the library. He didn't know I was standing just the other side of the door and in such a position that I could watch him dial. I know that number."

"Have you told the police?" I asked.

"No."

"Then don't." I stood up and reached for my hat. Edna Poole was frowning slightly as though she didn't understand? I wasn't sure that I understood either, but I said:

"All you know is that he called a woman, isn't that it? You could tell by the way he talked that it *was* a woman. Maybe he made a date with her and later gave out with the time-honored excuse that he had a big business conference on for that night. Something like that. Isn't that how it was?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then skip it. Landers is dead. Your mother is dead—" I saw Edna Poole wince—"and the thing is a closed book. What good would it do to drag anybody else into it? See what I mean?"

"Don't shout at me, Mr. Nettleton!"

"I'm not shouting," I probably shouted. I turned to the door, went

out into the hall, and slammed out the front door.

Julie, I felt like hell.

How I ever got down to your apartment without crashing into somebody, I don't know. My mind certainly wasn't on what I was doing. I put the rental car in the lot back of the building, locked it, still had the keys in my hand when I heard a quick, furtive step behind me.

There had probably been other steps that I was too preoccupied to notice. I remembered Elmer Brayton's clumsy attempt to follow me on the previous evening and suddenly I turned around.

That did it. That rushed him into a try for a quick knockout before I had a chance to see who it was. It wasn't a smart move on his part, because it was so dark in that portion of the lot I couldn't have identified him anyway.

I heard the swish and jerked to the right. The lug wrench brushed the brim of my hat, landed on my shoulder. I went down—not because I had to but because it seemed like a good idea. I didn't know what it was I had that he wanted, but this seemed like a way to find out.

So I lay there on my back on the concrete, and I could feel his breath on my closed eyelids as he bent over. I found myself wondering, almost disinterestedly, if he'd hit me again with the wrench and make this one stick. I didn't move and I didn't utter a sound.

Finally, he sighed and got down onto his knees beside me. He said, "My God," under his breath, almost prayerfully, and kept saying it as he went through my pockets.

Brayton? Well, who do you think, Julie?

HE DIDN'T find what he wanted in my pockets. He said, "Damn!" in a low, frenzied voice. He stood up. He took a single step and, unintentionally, I think, kicked my extended right arm close to the

wrist. The keys I still held in my right hand tinkled against the pavement. He said, "Ah!"

He dropped down onto his knees again, patting around in the dark until he found the keys in my hand. I let him have them, knowing suddenly that it wasn't *my* keys that he wanted but yours. The key to your apartment.

Remember how I told you he'd sized me up Wednesday night when I opened your door? He was wondering then what kind of a chance he would have against me in a fair fight. And he was deciding he wouldn't have any. Remember how he nosed around your living room?

He stood up. He moved away, slowly at first, then almost running. I raised my head a little, opened my eyes, saw his skinny silhouette slip through the rear door of the apartment. I stood up, rubbed a little feeling back into my shoulder, moved over to my rental car and leaned against it. I wanted to give him plenty of time.

When I thought he'd had plenty, I crossed to the back door of the building, went in quietly and up the half flight of steps to your door. I stood directly in front of it. He was in there somewhere.

I heard something flat and heavy, like a book smack the floor. I heard a drawer squeak. After a while his footsteps approached the door, paused, went back again as though he'd forgot something or had suddenly thought of one more place to look.

Finally, he was on the other side of the door, and this was it. Actually it. I watched the knob turn. When it was all the way over, I threw my weight against the door. It opened, not far but far enough for me to wedge my left foot in, and I heard Muffins screech as though he'd stepped on her.

I got my left shoulder in, and I could hear Brayton panting inches from my ear. I said as quietly as I

could and still make him understand that I meant it:

"How'd you like me to just open my trap and yell for the cops? Better think of the wife and kiddies."

He let me in, but fast. I think I was supposed to fall on my stupid face on the other side of the door and give him a chance to do a good job with the lug wrench. But I'd seen that one somewhere. The movies, probably.

I didn't fall. His swing was wild, and he'd put too much into it. It carried him halfway around, right arm down, lug wrench pointing toward the floor, his thin frame not too well balanced on his toes. I threw myself against him and at the same time caught hold of the wrench.

He went back against the wall, hanging onto the wrench as though it were life itself. He didn't let go until I brought my left elbow up to the point of his chin.

He let go. I stepped back, but he just stood there, plastered to the wall, thin face flushed, blue eyes as steady as a dead mackerel's.

"In there." I pointed to your living room with the lug wrench. "Get in there and stay put while I call the cops."

"No!" One hand fluttered up in protest. "You — you don't understand. Miss Merritt stole something from the office . . ."

There was more, Julie, but it was not intelligible because I was roughing his face a bit with my left hand. I pointed with the wrench again, and he sidled into your living room, stood against the end of the sofa.

He said, "If you'd let me explain—"

"Sure," I said, "after you've turned out your pockets. Every damned thing, right there on the sofa."

HE TURNED out his pockets— paper matches, cigarettes, keys, wallet, handkerchief, penknife, even some of that fuzz that seems to ac-

accumulate in pockets. But there was nothing I recognized as yours. I held the wrench over his head while my other hand made sure he hadn't held out anything.

I recovered my keycase, picked up his wallet, stepped to the doorway, stood there while I flipped open his wallet. Lodge card, driver's license, bills, two three-cent stamps, snapshots of the wife and kids. I tossed the wallet back to him.

"You see?" he said, his smile sickly. "I didn't find what I was looking for. It's all a stupid mistake on my part. Miss Merritt obviously isn't the guilty party."

"What were you looking for?" I demanded.

"Some — uh — invoices," he said. "Some check slips from the yard master. Nothing, really, of any value. It's only that—"

He picked his handkerchief up from the sofa and patted his brow with it. Muffins came in from the kitchen and started to rub on our ankles—Brayton's and mine. Muffins, I am afraid, is not a very discriminating cat.

I said, "I'm waiting."

"Yes, of course." Brayton tried the smile again. "Certain information was missing from our files. Information that, if it fell into the wrong hands, might be—uh—detrimental, shall we say?"

"Shall we?" I said. "Let's just put it in plain American."

He made sounds like laughter. "Information that could be used to the detriment of Wej-Lok, that's what I mean. Miss Merritt was among those who *might* have got hold of it." He added hastily. "Of course she hadn't—didn't. Naturally not. But until proven innocent she was assumed to be guilty. Actually, I have exonerated her, don't you see?" His hands opened pleadingly.

Muffins, who wasn't getting any attention from either of us, crossed sedately to her cushion, got onto it, and stared coldly at me. I stared

right back. I suddenly remembered something you said about cats one evening three months ago, shortly after we'd met. You said you liked cats because they kept their secrets well.

Julie, I let Brayton go back to the wife and kids. He wanted to fawn on me, he was that grateful, but I told him to get out before I changed my mind. He forgot to take his lug wrench, and I sincerely hope he had a flat tire.

As soon as he was gone, I pulled the cushion out from under Muffins and had a look at it. I noticed that portion of the binding which had been hand sewn and contrasted with the machine stitching. I got out my knife.

Julie, what is all this stuff? Invoices on steel shipped to Wej-Lok during the war years, and each invoice is attached to a form that is headed: SUPPLY—Office of Sup't. These forms are covered with scribbles that might just as well be Sanskrit for all they mean to me.

This is what Elmer Brayton was after.

I am 'way in over my head.

I am not having a good time. Wish you were here.

Jim

NETTLETON DETECTIVE BUREAU

Room 234

Hoosier Trust Building
Indianapolis, Indiana

Saturday, Sept. 18

Miss Julia Merritt
Hotel Delaney
Chicago, Illinois

Julia:

This is the way it looks to me:

Wej-Lok, manufacturing patent fasteners vital in the making of war materials, deliberately overestimated their needs, re-channeled the surplus steel into the black market at tremendous profit, wrote off the difference between amounts received and amounts used as so much waste.



Either that or:

Wej-Lock conspired with the steel company to pad the invoices. Working on a cost-plus basis, they were able to collect tidy little sums for material not received and not used.

It's one or the other, because—according to the stuff you hid in Muffins' cushion—the steel yard at Wej-Lok at no time had on hand anywhere near as much material as the invoices indicated.

Julia, that's crooked. And worse than ordinary theft. That amounts to taking advantage of Uncle Sam at a time when the old man was up to his whiskers in bloody conflict. We don't know, of course, but it's just possible some lives were lost simply because some of that steel was going places where it was not intended to go.

All that was years ago, of course. Could be some Congressional investigating committee will consider it water over the dam. But I don't think so.

Last night, after I'd sealed the letter written to you, I sat around your apartment and figured this out. It was ten-thirty, I had just arrived at the above conclusions when your phone rang. I picked it up and said hello.

"Who is this, please?" It was a woman's voice, and I recognized it. My heart started to pound. For a moment, I couldn't say anything, couldn't get the breath with which to speak.

And then I said, "This is James Nettleton's residence," lying, of course.

On the other end of the line, I heard

Edna Poole draw a quick breath. And then she hung up.

Remember, Julia, Edna Poole had a telephone number she was aching to give me? A number that I didn't want to hear? A number which I certainly did not want Edna to give to the police?

Your number, Julie.

And the old woman who spotted the Landers' *Town and Country* car, the night of the murder, told me that the same car had parked there frequently on other nights in the past, "though not recently." Had parked, that is, in front of the church at Sixteenth and Delaware.

Your apartment, Julia, is half a block from that church, on Delaware.

I tried to look at it this way: That whatever you had been to Adolph Landers, you had broken off with him. The real thing had come along—you and I, actually in love—and the other thing, by comparison, was pretty shoddy merchandise.

So you broke off with Landers and to make him leave you alone, you took from the Wej-Lok files certain papers which you knew would prove Landers and the whole crew of Wej-Lok officers guilty of a Federal offense. That was the ax you could hold over Landers' head.

I tried to tell myself that eventually you would have told me what you had been to Landers. And I would have forgiven you.

But there were so many other things—things I was trying so hard not to see. The bloodstains on Landers' handkerchief, for instance. Cold water—river water, in this instance—will remove bloodstains *unless the stains have first been fixed by putting the article in hot water.*

THEN there was the color of the water in your tub, Julia. Lavender. If you had used lavender bath salts, where were they? Where were the rose bath salts which I gave you? Would you take both lavender and rose bath salts with you to Chicago,

especially when the bottle that I gave you was such a large bottle?

Or was the water in the tub lavender because you had used rose bath salts, *and the blue dye in Landers' socks had "run"?*

This will be news to you, Julie: A wad of bloodstained absorbent cotton and a narrow strip of non-waterproof adhesive tape was responsible for the stoppage in your bathtub drain.

I've tried to make self-defense out of it. I can, up to a certain point, and then the whole thing blows up in my face.

This is what happened Wednesday night, as I see it:

You had drawn your bath, adding the rose bath salts to the water. There was a knock at the door. You slipped into something and answered it. Adolph Landers came in. He had a gun. Not only had you broken with him—and he must have been mad about you—but there was this new, potential injury to him, this evidence you had taken from the office files which was capable of landing him and Elmer Brayton in Federal prison.

I prefer to think that he would have killed you, Julia. But somehow during the struggle, you got him into the bathroom. There you hit him with something. (How ironic if your weapon happened to be the bottle of rose bath salts!)

Whether he fell into the tub or whether you helped him into it, after he was unconscious, I don't know. I don't care, because either way would have been strictly self-defense.

But he drowned in your tub. You were rid of him forever—except the troublesome little item of his body. Then, Julia, you did a very brash and a very logical thing. You telephoned Mrs. Landers. I believe you told her that Mr. Landers had died in your apartment. Just like that. And Mrs. Landers saw headlines in her mind:

WEALTHY MANUFACTURER FOUND
DEAD IN LOVE-NEST

She agreed with you that such a thing simply must not happen. Mrs.

Lander, took a taxi, acting on your instruction, to the corner of Sixteenth and Delaware where Landers always parked. Mrs. Landers then drove the *Town and Country* car to the rear of your apartment, left it there.

Together, you and Mrs. Landers removed the body to the car. It was risky but necessary, and you were not seen. One of you added the bottle of whiskey from your apartment as a final touch, and the plan, as Mrs. Landers saw it, was to drive the car to the river bank, get out, and let the car go on over.

It would have appeared like another drunken-driving accident. You would be safe. There would be no scandalous headlines to spoil Edna Poole's chances of marrying William Schuyler the Third.

But that isn't the way you worked it, Julia.

Mrs. Landers drove. The dead man was in the seat between you and his widow. When you got to the spot where the "accident" was to take place, you told Mrs. Landers to stop, leave the car in gear, and set the hand brake. This is quite possible with a car employing fluid coupling.

Then you shot Mrs. Landers, Julia.

The whole thing wouldn't have taken ten seconds. Pull the trigger, drop the gun in the car, hop out of the car, go around behind it and to the left side, open the door, release the hand brake, put Mrs. Landers' foot on the gas pedal, and slam the door as the car took off.

And you still had ample time to get back to your apartment, pick up your baggage, and get to the station before I did.

Self-preservation, Julia—to silence Mrs. Landers forever? I tried to make

it that, for self-preservation is, I think, the motive easiest to understand and possibly forgive. But Mrs. Landers would never have talked. She could not without involving herself.

No, Julia. Not self-preservation. Greed.

Because you must have known about Landers' will. Perhaps you witnessed it, or he had told you. The whole scheme of murder must have evolved in that short space of time between your drowning of Adolph Landers and your phoning Mrs. Landers.

With Mrs. Landers' co-operation—the word is tinged with irony in my mind—you could frame the picture so that it would appear as though Mrs. Landers had preceeded her husband in death. There would be a division of Adolph Landers' Wej-Lok stock. Elmer Brayton would have the controlling interest.

But you would be in control of Brayton, through the evidence of fraud against the Government which was in your possession. You would virtually have owned Wej-Lok.

I'm sending this to you via air mail, Julia. At the same time, I shall mail a complete report of the crime, one copy to the sheriff and another to the city police. All three envelopes should be delivered at their respective destinations at approximately the same time.

I cannot decently give you more than an even break.

In conclusion, let me say that I quite agree with you that marriage to a private detective might prove too much of a strain. On both of us. There are two dead now. And in books, and in the movies, they always kill three.

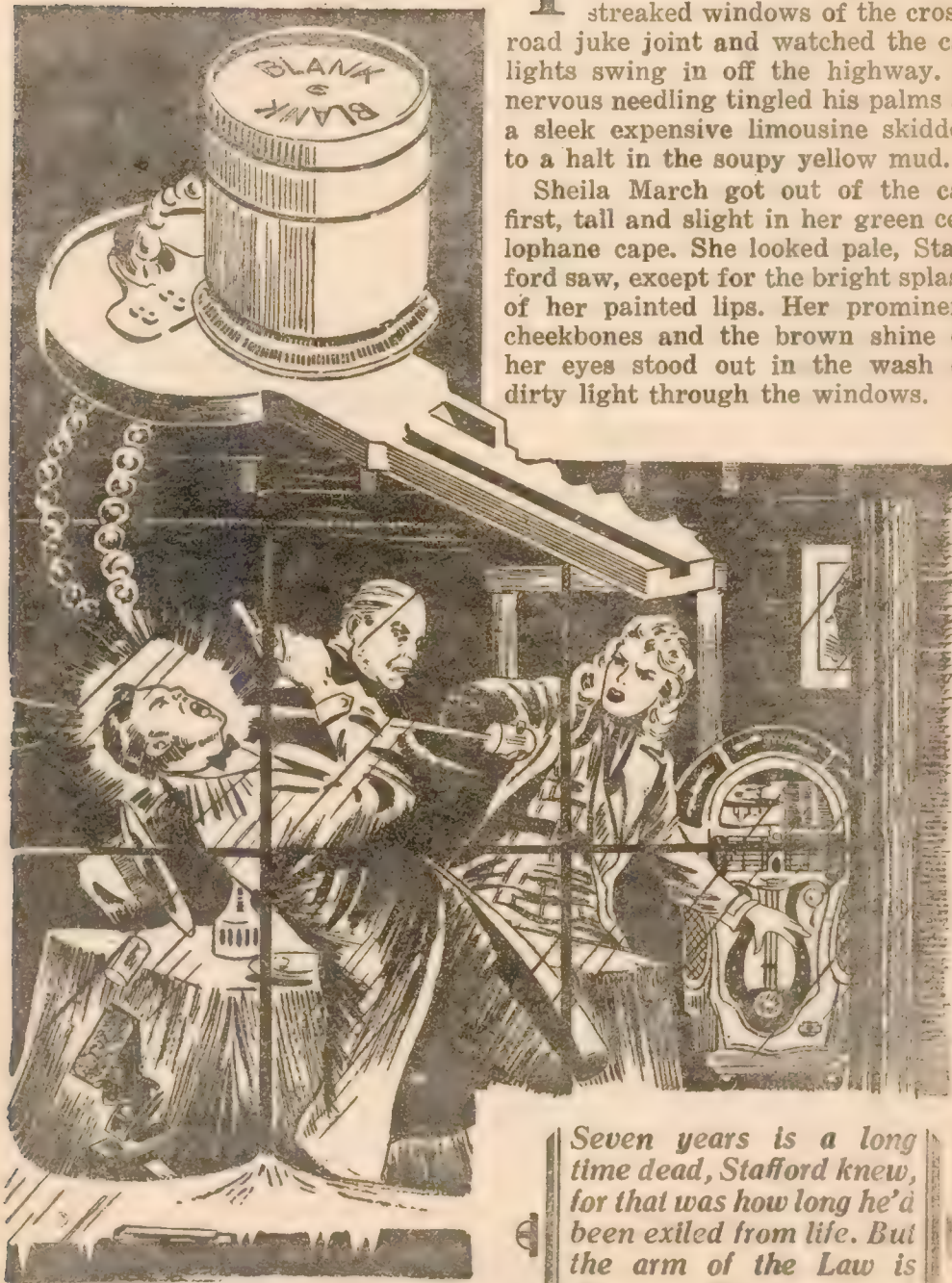
James Nettleton.



Forgive Us Our Dead

THAT rain-driven winter night Stafford stood by the water-streaked windows of the cross-road juke joint and watched the car lights swing in off the highway. A nervous needling tingled his palms as a sleek expensive limousine skidded to a halt in the soupy yellow mud.

Sheila March got out of the car first, tall and slight in her green cellophane cape. She looked pale, Stafford saw, except for the bright splash of her painted lips. Her prominent cheekbones and the brown shine of her eyes stood out in the wash of dirty light through the windows.



By Robert Turner

Seven years is a long time dead, Stafford knew, for that was how long he'd been exiled from life. But the arm of the Law is stronger than any—except the grip of Death.

Jeff Williams, the driver of the limousine, came around from his side and joined Sheila. He hadn't changed much, Stafford saw. Williams wore no coat and no hat, as usual, and his heavily polished brogans sloshed carelessly through the mud. His sparse brown hair had gotten thinner and he looked bloated and balloon-big in gray tweeds. Stafford had forgotten how big Williams really was.

Williams let the rain beat at him without wincing. Not even the elements fazed Jeff Williams. His beefy face grinned as he walked unsteadily beside Sheila toward the entrance. Sheila had gotten him half packaged. That was good, Stafford figured. It helped.

In a drunken monotone, Williams sang, not loud but audible to Stafford, "*You are my sunshine—my only sunshine. . .*"

"Stop that damn singing!" Sheila told him.

Nerves, Sheila, Stafford thought. Watch the nerves. You can't spoil this! Not now!

Grinning, rain running over his puffy features, Williams said, "Sure, baby. Sure. I'd do anything for you. I told you that."

Anything, Williams? A corner of Stafford's mouth twisted.

They came inside on a gust of wind and rain and stood there as the door slammed behind them, looking around. Williams said, "What a rat-hole! What a crumbjoint! It's deserted. What're we doin' here, baby? Let's blow this dive!"

"No," Sheila said. "Please, Jeff. I told you—I've got to have something to eat. I feel faint."

"Not a single, solitary soul here," Williams complained, but he followed Sheila resignedly.

STAFFORD was back behind the barbecue counter now and his eyes flicked around the place, trying to see it as a stranger would and he didn't much blame Jeff Williams. It was an overgrown shanty built onto

the front of the small house. It was dirty, unpainted and it smelled of stale beer and smoke and stale barbecue.

There was a U-shaped counter in the center of the room and Stafford stood behind that. There was a beer and soft drink cooler on one side. Several dimly lit booths lined the other wall, toward the back where the juke joint joined onto the house proper. Changing colored lights flowed liquidly over the front of a bulky old-fashioned juke box. Trumpets wailed out a whining blues.

Stafford watched Sheila and Jeff Williams move toward the rear of the shack, waited for them to get seated and then followed. Sweat made his palms moist. He put both hands flat on the checkered tablecloth so that they wouldn't see his trembling. He leaned between them, made himself look directly at Williams.

"What'll it be, folks?" he said.

Williams glanced up at him and then did a double take and, for a moment, fear flicked nakedly into his tiny, too closely set eyes. His kewpie lips skinned back from his teeth in a frightened grimace.

Stafford held his breath, kept telling himself: He can't recognize me. What does he see? A slender, medium-height guy with a pale, lean face, with eyes light gray in contrast to the blackness of brows and lashes, with thick, black, short-cropped hair. That's all. Just another guy named Joe working in a crummy juke joint on the main highway out of Lake City.

"No!" Williams managed finally, dully. He screwed up his little loose mouth, got control of himself. He shook his head as though to clear it. "For a moment"—he gave a quick, nervous laugh—"I thought you were—somebody I knew. But it couldn't be."

Stafford felt his hands sticking to the tablecloth. For a moment there his chest had been too small for the crazy leaping of his heart, even

though it was next to impossible for Williams to recognize him. His once long blond hair and sandy eyebrows were now dyed black. Seven years, three of them in the state pen, the rest on the lam, hiding, working for beans and bread in joints like this, had changed Ed Stafford almost beyond recognition.

His once heavy-set figure, flabby and soft from too easy living, had been whittled down to a wolflike gauntness. The loss of fifty pounds alone is often a perfect disguise. The dyed, short-cropped hair completed it. Still Williams had spotted something familiar, some mannerism perhaps, some slight facial expression or vocal tone. But only for that fleeting moment, Stafford was sure.

He heard Williams saying, gruffly, "Bring us a couple beers and some of that fried snake hide you call barbecue."

"Sure," Stafford said. "Two barbecues. Two beers."

He turned and left the table, wiping his palms up and down on the dirty white apron. Back at the counter he carved hunks of pork and tossed them into the skillet to heat. He sliced two round barbecue rolls, opened the beer bottles, set thick glasses over the tops of them.

All this he did automatically. He listened to rain rattling like buckshot against the windows. He wondered if this whole thing was going to come off. It was a wild idea—a million-to-one chance. Well, he'd always liked long shots. And what other way was there to do it? What did he have to lose?

He took the orders back to their booth. He watched Williams cram half the barbecue into his mouth with one bite, chew hoggishly and wash the food down with a deep draught of beer from the glass. He thought, *The condemned man ate heartily of his last meal. . .*

He said aloud, "You'd better enjoy that, mister."

WILLIAMS swallowed the last of his mouthful, glanced up, surprised and frowning. "Do you always stand around and watch your customers eat, you silly-looking yokel?" he demanded. "What do you mean, I'd better enjoy it? I don't." He looked down at the remainder of the barbecue sandwich in his huge fist. "I think it stinks. It tastes like dead cat. Scram, will you?"

Stafford felt his pulses begin to beat faster at his temples and in his wrists. "You'd better enjoy it," he repeated. "You're going to pay plenty for it."

He untied his apron, took it off and tossed it into the booth behind him. He reached back and took a raincoat and hat that were hanging there. He slipped into the raincoat and jammed the hat down onto his head. He took a small nickel-plated revolver from the slash pocket of the dirty raincoat. He held it loosely in his hand, pointed almost nonchalantly at Jeff Williams. He said:

"This is something I've been waiting for. I'm fed up with this joint. I'm fed up with slaving for a living."

Jeff Williams gaped at him, the sandwich poised halfway to his mouth, forgotten. Sheila March watched him, her eyes big with fear. He saw a little tic start to work at one corner of her red mouth.

Stafford said, "That's a nice big, expensive car you've got out there. Give me the keys to it. It'll take me far and fast."

Williams worked his mouth and gulped but no words came out. His face started to get red and a large vein swelled across the side of his forehead. Slowly, deliberately, he put the sandwich back down onto the plate. He put his large, puffy red hands flat on the table, ready to push himself up to a standing position. His bulldog jaw thrust out and his small eyes grew bright and beady with anger. He didn't look at the gun in Stafford's hand. He had lots of

guts, Williams. Stafford had to give him that. The crazy, stupid guts of a mad bull that would charge right into a speeding locomotive.

Stafford's grip on the gun tightened. He thrust it slightly toward Williams. He said, "Don't try to be a hero, mister. I'll use this. I'm not fooling."

There was something in his tone that made Williams pause and glance up at Stafford's face. He saw the dead, flat, hard gray of Stafford's gaze. He saw the tight pull of Stafford's mouth and the set of his jaw. The past seven years had put things into Stafford's face that even Williams in his fury could recognize. Williams' hands relaxed on the table. He remained tensed but he didn't try to get up.

He said, "You're crazy, man. You can't get away with stealing my car. You'll be picked up before you've gone five miles."

Stafford's eyes were unflinching. "The keys!" he said.

Williams' face grew redder but he fumbled into his pocket and pulled out a small ring of keys. He tossed them toward Stafford who easily snared them out of the air. He stuffed them into his raincoat pocket with his free hand. He said, "That's fine. Now, the dough."

Jeff Williams swore. Then his eyes narrowed craftily. He whined, "You're goin' to leave me and the girl stranded here? I've only got a few bucks. Not enough to do you any good. Let me keep it."

"Don't give me that," Stafford told him. "Get your wallet out. Take the dough out of it and put it on the edge of the table. Guys don't drive a wagon like that one of yours and only carry a few bucks with them. Hurry it."

Williams argued briefly but ineffectively. Finally he reached into his pocket and withdrew a fat ostrich-skin wallet. He pulled out a thick packet of bills and put them

on the edge of the table. His voice thick with rage, he rumbled:

"There's four hundred fifty bucks there. I didn't give a damn about the car—it's insured. But when you take that kind of money from Jeff Williams, you're stickin' your fool head into a trap. I'll see that they catch you for this if it takes every cent I have."

STAFFORD made a flat, humorless laughing noise in his throat and stepped forward, scooped up the packet of bills. As he half bent toward the table to do so, Sheila March, who hadn't taken her hand from her beer glass all through the scene, suddenly flicked her wrist. The whole glass of beer sloshed full into Stafford's face.

She cried shrilly, "Get him, Jeff! Get the gun!"

Swearing, spluttering, his face twisted with the sting of the beer in his eyes, Stafford tried to step back away from the table. But Jeff Williams was fast for such a big man. He squeezed out from the booth and flung his great bulk upon Stafford while the smaller man was still half blinded. His hand closed over Stafford's gun-wrist.

He twisted and Stafford's fingers loosened. Williams got the revolver away from him but before he could step back and away, Stafford got hold of Williams' arm, wrestled violently with every ounce of strength to get the weapon back.

They were standing close together, legs braced apart, straining and breathing loudly from their exertion. The gun was close between them, held in Williams' hand, pointed a little toward Stafford. Suddenly Stafford's hand accidentally closed over Williams' fingers and the revolver went off with a flash of orange flame and a report sharp and flat like two heavy books being slammed together.

Stafford stepped back. His legs bent at the knees and he hunched over, pulling the folds of the rain-

coat around tight in front of him and pressing his hands into his stomach as with violent pain. His thin face, still streaked with the beer, was white and twisted as a gargoyle's mask. His mouth gaped and in a strained, almost surprised voice, he gasped, "You—you shot me! You killed me, you—"

He didn't finish. His legs went out from under him and he collapsed in sections like a suddenly emptied gunny sack. He lay, half curled onto one side, his face against the floor.

Jeff Williams staggered back, his fingers opening and letting the nickel-plated revolver clatter to the floor, still smoking. He leaned against the side of a booth and sleeved sweat from his face. He turned slowly toward Sheila March, who was now standing up.

He said haltingly, "You—saw. He tried to rob me. He—held me up. I had—to do it. It was self-defense. It was either him or me."

He looked down at Stafford on the floor. His small mouth curled at one corner. "The stupid fool!" he said. "The crazy little small-time punk, taking that for a few hundred bucks and a car that would have gotten him caught anyway. What's the matter with guys like that? Why don't they use their brains?"

He watched Sheila stooping, picking up the scattered greenbacks that had fallen from Stafford's hand when she had tossed the beer into his face.

He said, "What are you doing? Leave that money where it is, Sheila. That's evidence. Leave it alone."

She didn't seem to hear him. She finished gathering up the bills. She stuffed them into the wallet still lying on the table. She tossed the wallet back to Williams, saying, "Return that to your pocket, Jeff."

He caught the wallet, stood there looking vacantly down at it in his hands. When he glanced up again, Sheila March had her opened purse in one hand, a small, pearl-gripped lady's automatic in the other pointed

at Williams. He blinked and shook his head, groggily.

"Has everyone gone nuts tonight?" he demanded. "What are you doing with that gun, Sheila?"

The skin of her face suddenly seemed drawn too tightly over the delicate bone structure. The rouge on her cheekbones stood out in bright flags of color.

"There's a phone up front, Jeff," she said tautly. "You're going to use it to call the local sheriff and tell him to come down and get you. You've just killed a man in a fight over me."

His eyes seemed to come out of his head. "What are you talking about? The guy tried to—"

"Who said so, Jeff?" She stopped him. "How are you going to prove that? Nobody saw this thing but me. I'm the witness, Jeff. If I say you killed this man in cold blood, that's the way it will be. There'll be no evidence of robbery."

She suddenly stepped sideways next to Stafford. She bent and without taking her eyes from Jeff Williams, fumbled her hand into the pocket of Stafford's raincoat. She brought forth the car keys, straightened and tossed them to Williams.

"Put those back in your pocket," she ordered.

HE LOOKED down at the revolver on the floor. "You couldn't make that stick," he said. "In the first place, the gun was his. That can be checked."

"Can it, Jeff?" she smiled. "Not that gun. . . . How do you like it, Jeff? How does it feel when it happens to you?"

A sudden light of understanding broke over his beefy, puzzled features. He said the name as though it was a dirty word. "Stafford!"

"Yes," Sheila said. She gestured toward the booth. "Sit down, Jeff. You look weak in the knees. I've got a little story to tell you."

Williams half fell into the booth.

He passed a hand over his face, from the forehead all the way down.

"Who—who are you, Sheila?" he said weakly. All the bluff and bravado and the loudness of the liquor had been shocked out of him. "What's this all about?"

"I'm Stafford's fiancée," she said simply. "I met him since he broke out from prison. He told me his whole story and I set out to help him. I got a job as your secretary, played up to you, let you try to make love to find some proof of the truth of what really happened that night seven years ago. But I didn't have any luck."

She paused, waiting for Jeff Williams to say something, but he didn't seem to have anything to say. He just stared at her and tugged the long, hairy lobe of one of his ears.

She went on: "Remember, Jeff, what happened that night? It was almost like this. Only the scenery was different. That happened in the office of the swank Owl Club you and Ed Stafford ran, as partners in Lake City."

She went over it quickly for him. A waiter had been fired. Angry, he came to the office of the club that night, after closing, drunk and with a gun. He held them up, made them open the safe. Only there was a gun hidden in the safe. Stafford grabbed at it, whirled around and shot the waiter. He'd had every right. It was a pure and simple case of self-defense against armed robbery.

"But you were inspired that night, Jeff," Sheila went on. "You got a brilliant idea. There was a singer in the club that you were crazy about—only she preferred Ed Stafford. But you figured with Stafford out of the way, she'd switch over to you. And with Stafford out of the way, you'd have the whole club all to yourself. Everything was set up nicely for you because Ed had fired that waiter and at the time there'd been an argument

over the amount of pay owed to him—and over the gal torch singer, whom the waiter was in love with, too.

"It was a natural. You removed the slight evidence of a holdup and swore that Ed Stafford had flown into a rage during an argument with the waiter and shot him in cold blood. That stuck. The court bought that and Ed Stafford took a second-degree murder rap. Remember, Jeff?"

He remembered. You could see it in the guilty shifting of his small, swinish eyes, in the twitching of his too-full lips. Hoarsely, he said, "What's that got to do with this, Sheila?"

"You don't know?" she said scornfully. "You still don't see it?"

He shook his head dumbly. He looked at the man he had shot, curled up on the floor, unmoving, a few feet away. "I—I dunno," he said. "Unless you fixed this. Unless you—"

"That's about right," she said. "I came out here earlier today and sold this guy on holding up the rich lug I was bringing out tonight. I had it planned to help you jump him and get the gun. I hoped it would work out that you'd kill him, Jeff. Now I've got you."

"What—what do you mean—got me?"

"You're going to clear Ed Stafford of that other murder rap. You're going to tell the truth about it."

He poked out his lower lip. "Don't be ridiculous, Sheila. I—I can't do that."

"You *will* do it." There was a sudden, triumphant light in her dark eyes. Some of the color washed back into her face. "You have a choice. Clear Stafford and face a perjury charge for your false testimony in his case—or face a murder rap of the same kind that you framed around Ed—based on my testimony that you killed that man on the floor in a drunken fight over me. Take your choice, Jeff."

THE flabby features of Jeff Williams suddenly seemed to fall apart. They were glistening with sweat. He raised a trembling hand to his brow.

"All—all right, Sheila," he said quakingly. "I'll admit it. I—I'll tell them of what happened that night with Ed. I—"

"What are you going to tell them?" she cut in. "Say it, Jeff."

He looked trapped. Finally he blurted, "That Stafford killed that man in self-defense to prevent an armed holdup—that I lied and framed him."

"You'll sign a confession to that effect?"

Readily—too readily—a sudden glint of cunning partially veiling his eyes, Jeff Williams agreed.

"How do I know you won't back out, Jeff?" she said. But as he opened his mouth to answer, she interrupted him. She laughed quickly. "It doesn't matter. Never mind the reassurances. I don't need them."

Suddenly she turned toward a door a few yards away, leading from the juke joint into the back of the house. "It's okay," she called. "It's all over now."

The door opened. Two men stepped out. The small, mousy-looking one switched on a wall light and the dimness in the back of the place was suddenly illuminated brightly. The other man, tall and rawboned, with a heavily lined face, held a Police Positive in one hand and a pair of handcuffs in the other.

He said, "Nice work, Miss March."

Sheila said, "Jeff, this is Sheriff Don Gurston, the local law. And Walt Angus, the man who owns this place, Ed Stafford's boss."

They all looked toward Stafford, now, who was getting slowly up from the floor. His face was still stiffened with pain. He opened the raincoat

and looked down at the blackened, burned place on his shirt front.

He said, "Those damned blanks do a lot of damage. Burned half of the skin off of my chest. It's a good thing it wasn't my face."

"We'll get those burns treated shortly," Sheriff Gurston said. He gestured toward the booth where Sheila and Jeff Williams had been sitting. "Ed," he told Stafford, "go over and unhook that wire-recording outfit under the table while I put the bracelets on your friend."

Jeff Williams didn't even look at the sheriff as the handcuffs were snapped on him. He kept staring at Stafford. Finally, he gasped: "It—it is you, Ed. How you've changed! There was something about you that hit me, right at first, but it seemed impossible. . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You'd change, too, if you'd been through what I have," Stafford told him. "I suppose you're wondering how an escaped con like me got the law to help him out?" He laughed bitterly. "It was Sheila's idea. We took an awful chance. She went to the sheriff and told him she'd turn me over to him without any trouble if he'd give us a chance to work the trick on you—and if it didn't turn out. He had nothing to lose. Either way, it would be a big feather in his cap."

He handed the wire-recording outfit to Gurston. He went over to Sheila. He held her close for a moment and buried his face against her hair.

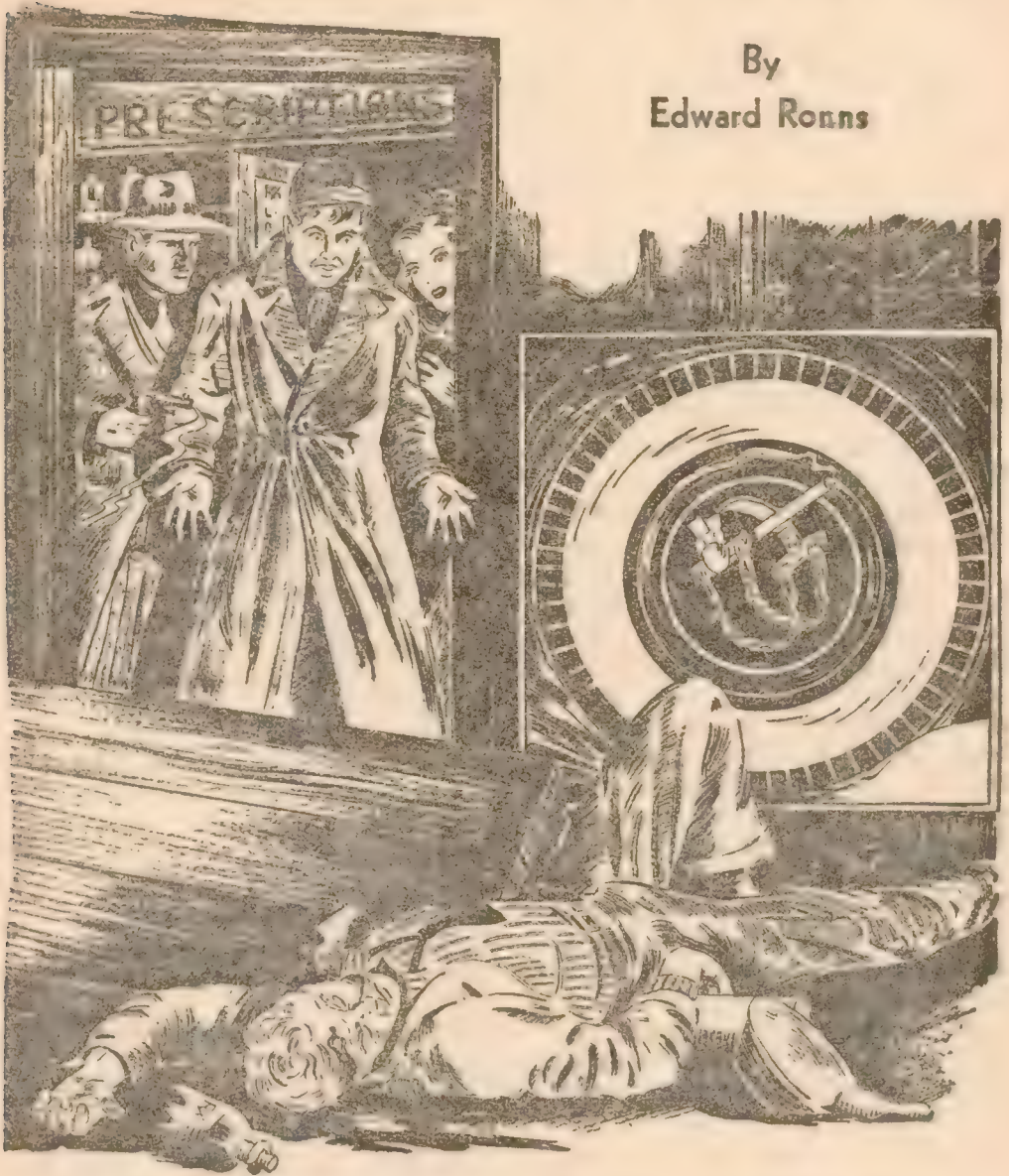
"Thanks, baby," he said. "You ride in with us to town. I want you with me every minute possible now. It'll probably be some time before my pardon can go through."

"Sure, Ed," she said, and with their arms around each other they followed the others out of the juke joint and into the night rain that was suddenly clean and cool and fine upon their faces.



Blood in the Bargain

By
Edward Ronns



Joe Turner was willing to trade his own life for his wife's freedom. But when the man calling the turn holds a smoking gun, you can't bargain with murder.

LIS said, "Joe. We're all out of cigarettes."

"I know," Joe said. "I'm going out for some."

"While you're gone," Lis said, "you might as well ask that Mr. Smith if he's found a set of chains that fit. He promised he'd look, remember?"

"Sure, honey."

Joe Turner crossed the tiny cabin to the severe iron bedstead where Lis, his wife, was reading, skis stacked against the wall beside her. One thing these New Englanders knew how to do, he reflected gratefully, and that was to keep warm.

The potbellied coal stove in the center of the motel room crackled with hot cheer. It wasn't a bad little tourist camp, and the snowstorm outside hadn't put them in a position to be choosy, anyway. He smiled fondly down at Lisbeth's bright golden head as she read her magazine.

"You might as well turn in while I'm gone, honey," he said.

"I'll wait for you. Don't forget about the chains, Joe."

"I won't. I'd like to get home to New York and the kids, too."

He closed the door quickly behind him to keep the cold out of the tiny cabin, and stood for a moment on the step, orienting himself in the snowy darkness. Already, in the half hour since they'd pulled in off the road, a heavy layer of snow covered his car, parked in the slot between his cabin and the next. A regular blizzard, he thought, and was grateful that he and Lis had cut their ski vacation short in order to get an early start home.

Even so, the storm had forced him off the road for safety's sake, and now there was only one immediate goal in mind—to reach the New York apartment safely, where Lisbeth's mother was taking care of the twins, Bobbie and Barbara.

It had been a swell week, a kind of second honeymoon for Lis and himself, and he had no intention of marring it by flirting with accidents on the dangerous highway here in the Litchfield Hills.

A red and yellow neon sign winked at him through the swiftly falling snow. Joe turned up his coat collar and trudged along the drifted path between the cabins toward the light. It advertised: *Ed Smith's Tourist Camp — Reasonable Rates — Every*

Cabin Heated. It had beckoned as a welcome oasis in the dark.

MR. SMITH'S house was a converted farm establishment, a big rambling house of white clapboards with cheerfully lighted windows. Joe stamped snow off his shoes on the porch. The door wasn't locked.

He thumbed the latch and let himself into the combination living room and office used by Mr. Smith. The proprietor, a lean swamp Yankee with grizzled gray hair and an uncompromising jaw, looked up and sniffed at the cold air that came in with Joe.

"Gettin' them chains for your car in a minute, Mr. Turner. Got a busy night. Lots of folks sensible enough to come in off the highway in weather like this. I'm right full up already."

An unfinished game of chess stood on a table before the fireplace. Mr. Smith looked broodingly at the red and black pieces.

"Do you sell any cigarettes?" Joe asked.

"Nope. Get 'em at Gilberry's, down the road a piece." Mr. Smith looked at the clock on the wall. "Adam Gilberry stays open 'til ten. Drug store. Then he's due here to finish this game of chess with me." Mr. Smith shook his head unhappily. "He's got the black. Stake's ten dollars, and wind nor snow won't keep him from collectin' from me."

"Thanks," Joe said. "I'll bring him back with me."

It was still a few minutes before ten o'clock. The bitter wind cut at Joe's face when he turned down the highway. The valley was like a funnel, gathering the brute strength of the storm as it raged in the hills. In just a few steps, the snow blotted out the neon sign behind him.

Joe walked with care on the ice-coated highway, his only concern being to make the trip safely. He had noted this excess of caution growing in him ever since he'd been married, four years ago.

Until then, he'd felt responsible to

no one. Lis and the twins made the difference. He had to be careful now for their sake, and his safe return from three years with the Navy in the Pacific only served to emphasize this trait now that he was in civvies again.

Not that Joe was old or stodgy. He was just past thirty, tall and in excellent shape, with dark red hair and serious blue eyes that had seen too much of death and destruction to ever risk its approach to his wife and children. So he had become careful, knowing they all depended on him, and he looked both ways when crossing a street and he pulled off the road in a snowstorm, instead of helling right through for the fun of it, as he would have done in the old days.

Definitely, Joe Turner wasn't looking for trouble.

There was a faint glow of light around the bend in the highway, and the drug store windows came into view as he trudged along the edge of the road. A car was parked on the shoulder, lights out, and Joe almost plowed into it before he saw it and heard its motor.

He swerved around the back of the sedan and listened to the car engine race in frustration. The rear wheels spun with a whining sound, and the smell of rubber came through the snow. Joe trudged closer to the car and the man who cursed at the wheel.

"Let me help," Joe offered. "I'll push."

He still wasn't looking for trouble. Nor was he expecting the other's reaction. The man turned a beefy, congested face reflecting anger and quick fear. His breath frosted on the air as he rumbled:

"Who the hell are you? Where did you come from?"

"The tourist camp back there," Joe said. "You want a hand?"

"Beat it, chum."

"Well, all I—"

"Look, will you beat it?" The man's voice went rising on the ragged edge of strained nerves. "I don't need any help."

"Okay," Joe said. "Sit here all night if you like."

The sedan trembled and shook as the burly man stepped on the gas. It slid forward a few inches, the rear wheels spinning crazily on the ice, then stopped. Joe shrugged and walked on toward the drug store. There were houses around, the outskirts of a village, like wraiths in the snowy darkness. The wind was bitter, penetrating, driving the snow along the road in blinding curtains of white.

Joe shivered in the blast of weather. Someone else had walked the road just ahead of him—a couple, judging from the trail—and their footprints were already almost obliterated by the drifts.

THE lighted windows of the drug store looked warm and welcoming. Joe stamped snow onto the wooden steps and thumbed the door open. A bell jangled somewhere behind the old-fashioned pharmacist's counter, and warm air rushed to greet him as he stepped in out of the cold.

He didn't see anyone at first. The store looked deserted. The girl's voice, coming from beside him and close by the door, almost made him jump out of his skin.

"We're closed, mister."

She didn't look like a druggist. Her smart hat, her carefully coiffed red hair and too-red mouth spoke of the city and not a snowbound Connecticut hamlet. Her voice had a taut, rasping quality that startled him, and her face was white—too white. A puddle of water stained the floor where snow had melted from her zippered rubber boots. She would have been pretty, Joe thought, if she didn't look scared to death.

"I only want some cigarettes," he said mildly.

"No cigarettes. We're closed, didn't you hear?"

"But I—"

Her voice sang high. "Do I have to spell it out? Beat it!"

That made the second time in as

many minutes that he had been told to move on. Later, Joe reflected, he should have heeded the warnings, since he wasn't looking for any more trouble than he already had due to the storm. But something in the girl's thin, pale face made him stubborn.

He didn't leave. He looked her over quietly, noting the way she clutched her sequined bag in shaky fingers. She was wearing a mink coat—perhaps not this year's mink, but a coat that would have cost him a year's salary, at least.

The spring bell that had jangled when he opened the door had stopped ringing, and he was struck by the complete silence in the little store. No sound anywhere, except for the girl's quick, impatient breathing. He looked beyond her to the counter on which a name-plate stood beside rows of bottles.

"Isn't Mr. Gilberry in?"

"Look, mister . . ." The girl was definitely frightened. Her words tumbled over each other. She was just a kid, Joe thought, twenty maybe, under the veneer of her sophistication. She was saying, "I told you once, I'll tell you again. For your own good, mister. The store is closed, y'understand. Mr. Gilberry isn't here. No cigarettes, laddy. Go home and smoke a pipe. But go home."

The sound of the shot punctuated her urgent speech. And with the sound came trouble for Joe. It wasn't much noise—a little cough, muffled through the partition that blocked off the back room. And then a series of tortured thumps as someone slid slowly to the floor.

The redhaired girl stood frozen, her lips parted and queerly twisted by terror. Joe wasted no time on her. Again, later, he thought he should have taken to his heels while he had the chance. Instead, he crossed the floor with long strides, heading for the back room.

He didn't quite make it before the swinging door with Mr. Gilberry's

name on it was pushed violently open and a man backed out of the rear room. He heard Joe's steps and whirled. He had a gun in his hand, as ugly and violent as his face. A small man, with a red pretty face full of fright and the bitter rage of one who has just committed murder.

He saw Joe Turner and stopped short.

"What the hell . . ."

The girl's voice rattled. "I couldn't help it, Al. He just barged in here. I thought the door was locked, but he just walked in. Al, what did you do? Did you shoot him? Did you, Al?"

"Shut up," said the little man.

JOE looked at the gun in his hand. He didn't need a diagram to know what had just happened, what he had walked into. A holdup, ending in murder. He didn't have to go into the back room to know that Mr. Gilberry, the druggist, was dead and the safe empty. He looked at Al's gun and swallowed hard. There's nothing you can do against a gun in another man's hands. Nothing but stand and wait for it to speak.

"Al," the girl whispered. "The old man?"

"He tried to play it smart," Al said. His eyes were white crescents, watching Joe's tall figure. "You curious, brother?"

"No," Joe said.

"Not even a little?"

Joe was silent.

Al said, "Go ahead, brother. Take a look."

Joe said, "All I wanted was cigarettes. I don't want to get mixed up in anything."

"Go in the back room and look."

His spine crawled as he looked through the open doorway. He had never seen Mr. Gilberry before. Middle-aged, with a round head and white hair and a pink, waxen face upturned to the ceiling. There was a bullet wound in his head. His linen coat looked twisted and bunched at his

neck, where blood had stained the cloth an ugly red.

Behind him, he heard a thump as the girl dropped her handbag. Joe turned to see her gathering up a scatter of lipstick, compact, loose coins, keys, and an ivory-handled .28 revolver.

Al made a snarling sound. "Can't you ever hold on to that bag?"

"I'm nervous," the girl snapped.

Al shrugged and turned to Joe. "Look. You know me, brother?"

"No," Joe said. "And I don't want to."

"But you seen me. Which is too bad for you. Get it?" Al's voice was a rising whine, whipping to anger. "You shouldn't have walked in just now. It's too bad, that's all. I got nothing against you, brother, nothing at all, except that you seen me."

Joe swallowed hard pain in his throat. The dapper little man was going to kill him because he had witnessed the murder. It was incredible that it could happen so fast, like snapping your thumb, and the whole world turns upside down and goes crazy. One minute all he was worried about was cigarettes and tire chains for the next day's drive home. Now he was going to die. He didn't believe it. It didn't make sense.

A clumping sound came from outside, where someone kicked snow off his boots. The big man came in, the one from the car stuck in the drift. His face was as ugly and sullen as it had been when Joe stopped to offer help. In the short walk to the drug store the snow had crusted his dark hat and overcoat and made his hard, chunky face flame. His dark eyes held no emotion as he closed the door behind him.

"Ollie," the redheaded girl said quickly. "Al burned the yokel. He kicked up a bit. Then this fellow walked in—"

Al said, "Corinne, shut up! What's wrong, Ollie?"

"The car," said the big man. "It's stuck."

The girl whimpered. Al licked his lips. He kept the short-barreled revolver pointed at Joe. The girl said bitterly:

"I knew we shouldn't have done it! You just had a bright idea—a push-over, you said. Why didn't we just keep going, like we planned? What did you have to stop here for, anyway?"

"A buck is a buck," said the big man. He looked at Joe with blank eyes all the more dangerous for the lack of luster. "Well, Al?"

"Let the yokel push us out," Al decided. "He gets an extra five minutes. Don't that make you happy, brother?"

"Sure," said Joe. "I'm having the time of my life."

"The last time," Al said. "Let's go look it over."

Wind and snow rushed at them with fury. The girl carefully turned out the lights and locked the drug store behind them. For a moment they huddled on the steps, hesitant before the howling of the storm.

There was nothing to see anywhere. No lights in the near-by village houses, no cars on the road. It was hard to tell where the road was, the way the snow had drifted over fence and ditch. Al's gun prodded through Joe's overcoat.

"Nice weather. You first, brother."

IT WASN'T so bad walking back to the stalled sedan. The wind came from the rear and made it possible to keep his eyes open. The night was queerly bright with the swirling snow. In the few minutes since he had first passed the car, the big man had done its situation little good. The rear wheels had slipped from the road shoulder and were jammed into a bank against the guard rail. Joe paused and promptly felt the prod of Al's gun.

"Ollie will try again. You and Corinne push. I watch."

The girl started to protest, but the rush of wind snatched her feeble words away. Joe shrugged and went

around to the back of the car, bracing himself against the rail post. The girl shivered beside him, not touching the car. Al stood with his feet braced on the slippery ice.

Ollie started the car. The motor roared, the rear wheels spun around, and the smell of rubber was momentary on the bitter wind. Joe heaved. Nothing happened. The car didn't budge. The big man at the wheel threw the car into reverse in an attempt to rock it back and forth. Still nothing happened.

Now or never, Joe thought.

He waited another second until Al called an impatient instruction to Ollie. The girl was looking the other way, down-wind. Joe simply backed off, vaulted the guard rail, and floundered down the steep bank into the roadside ditch. Snow poured down the slope with him in a minor avalanche. His leg shot out from under him and he half slid and half rolled to the bottom.

He heard Al's shout of alarm distantly muffled in the sleety snow. Thin winter branches of juniper whipped at his face as he struggled to get to his feet. Something dark moved against the white edge of the road overhead.

Joe scrambled erect. The ditch paralleled the curve of the road, and there was little he could see beyond a dark stand of cedar sloping up to form the hill that flanked the valley.

He wasted a precious moment trying to get up the opposite side of the ditch, but the snow and ice offered no footing. His breath whistled in his throat as he fell back, gasping, the cold air striking viciously at his straining lungs. He started off at a floundering run in the bottom of the gully, toward the tourist camp around the bend in the road.

It only took a few steps to realize he had no chance for speed, that he was trapped in the rocky, debris-strewn gully. His ankle twisted painfully under him as he slipped on an ice-concealed boulder, and he went

down on hands and knees in a scatter of snow.

The next moment, before he could regain his feet, the big man landed on him, dropping from the lip of the ditch with crushing force. Joe was driven flat into the snow, the breath knocked out of him like from an explosion. The direction and violence of the attack left him helpless.

Ollie's heavy knee ground brutally into his kidneys, and a massive fist slammed viciously into the back of his neck. Joe felt smothered. Darkness crashed through his brain like a tidal wave. He struggled to roll over and saw Ollie towering over him, enormous against the white night, an implacable nemesis.

"Get up," Ollie said heavily.

Joe clambered slowly to his feet. Without the desperate panic of his first flight, he found he could climb the side of the ditch with comparative ease.

Al and Corinne were waiting for him at the car that loomed out of the snowy night. They might have been in the middle of an Arctic tundra, for all the signs of anyone else near-by. Al gestured with his gun as Joe approached. The redheaded girl was shivering violently in her mink coat.

"What's your name?" Al asked.

"Joe."

"Joe what?"

"Turner. Joe Turner."

"You live around here?"

Joe hesitated. "No."

"You got a car?"

Joe paused again, and Al smiled crookedly. "All right, where is it?"

"Look, it needs chains on this road—"

"Where is it, Mr. Turner?"

He told them. There was nothing else he could do, with the gun pointed at him.

NO ONE saw them as they trooped up the road, leaving the big sedan abandoned to the wind and snow. There were lights on in Mr. Smith's house, but the driveway between the

tourist cabins was dark and deserted. All the other occupants seemed to have turned in early.

Only one little window shone through the night, and that was from Joe's own cabin. He thought of Lis, waiting for him to return with cigarettes, unprepared and unaware of any danger. His legs went weak. He halted in front of his coupé, dark and snowbound between cabins.

"Here it is," he told Al. "I'll go in and get the keys. You can have the car, and welcome."

"I'll bet," Al said. "Let's go in."

"It's not necessary—"

Al said tightly, "Be reasonable. Don't strain me, brother."

Joe considered turning on them and having it out then and there, but as before, Al's gun deterred him. There was nothing he could do against the gun. And Al's taut state of mind might yield to anything. Hysteria, as a reaction to murder, trembled behind every word the little man uttered. Joe wished he could warn Lisbeth somehow, but there was no way to do that. He shrugged and opened the cabin door.

They all trooped in after him, glad to be out of the biting wind. The single room was warm and cheerful. The bed had been turned down and Joe's pajamas were laid out next to Lisbeth's gown, and their slippers stood side by side under the bed. But there was no sign of Lisbeth herself.

He felt weak with relief. He said, hastily, "Keys are on the table there. Take them and take the car. All I want is to be left alone."

The redheaded girl giggled, looking at the bed. Big Ollie made a grunting sound, leaning his shoulders against the closed door. Al seemed to be standing on tiptoe with tension.

"Who's with you?" the little man asked.

"What's it matter?" Joe countered. He picked up the car keys from the bed table and faced the trio. "Come on. If you insist, I'll drive you wherever you want to go."

Corinne said, "It's his wife. He looks too respectable."

"Yeah," Al said. "His wife."

Joe said, "Leave her out of this." His thin face was tight and troubled. "What are you waiting for?"

Al seemed to come down off his toes. Ollie settled more heavily against the door. Corinne sat down on the edge of the bed. As always, Al did the talking.

"There's no rush. We'll wait for your wife," he said.

"What do you want with her? I'm the only one who's seen you. She doesn't know anything about all this. Why bring her into it?"

Al grinned. "Just to make sure you behave. Anyway, if you didn't come back here, she'd raise an alarm quick enough. This way, we got until morning, practically."

Sleet rattled against the windows of the cabin. Corinne lit a cigarette, the match scratching noisily above the sound of the wind outside. Both men looked at her with annoyance, as if the scratch of the match also ripped along their nerves. Joe waited. He wondered where Lisbeth had gone, and why. Wherever it was, she would be back soon. There was nothing to do but wait.

IT WASN'T long. Footsteps, light and lithe and unmistakably Lisbeth's, crunched in the brittle snow outdoors and rounded the parked car. She came in with a gust of icy wind, her cheeks flushed, the snow a halo of diamonds twinkling in her honey hair. She saw Joe first.

"Joe, Mr. Smith says he's found a set of chains he'll sell you—"

"A dish," Al said loudly. "A real dish."

Lis stopped and stared, but there was nothing in her eyes except bewilderment as she looked at the two strange men and the redhead. She gave Corinne the longest stare before turning back to Joe's pale face.

"Darling, who are these people?"

"Friends," Al said. "Nothing to worry about."

"Joe doesn't know you, I'm sure," Lis said. "I—"

"Shut up," Al said, and the red-headed girl smiled in twisted enjoyment. "Shut up, lady, and behave yourself. Get over there with your husband."

For the first time Lis seemed to see the gun in Al's hand. Some of the color faded from her face. She lifted her hands to her snow-crusted felt hat and paused with her hands in mid-air.

"Joe, is this a holdup?"

"Something like that," Joe said.

"Well, give them whatever they want, Joe."

He said, "They want the car."

"Well—"

Al said heavily, "Look, brother. Get it straight. This Mr. Smith is expecting you to come for them chains. We could use 'em, too. If you don't go for them, he'll think it's funny, after you been pestering him for them. I don't want anybody getting curious about you. So you go get those tire chains, see?"

Ollie spoke in a flat voice, "Al, you're nuts."

"No, I ain't. This guy loves his wife. She's a dish, all right. But she stays here with us while he goes for the chains. And if he don't come back right away, she'll get it first. And if there's any tip-off later, she'll get it the way he won't like it."

Joe's face was white. "I told you to leave her out of this. I told you to take my car and get going. I don't want any trouble. I've got two kids waiting for me to come home. I don't want anything to interfere with that. So take the car and get going."

"And how long would it be before you got the state cops after us?" Al sneered.

"I'll give you as long as you want," Joe said. "Just leave us alone."

"You'll give us," Al said. "That's good." His grin was erased abruptly from his small, pinched face. "Go on, stupid. Get them chains. Your wife

stays here. Corinne, you go with him."

Corinne stood up, sullen and peering. Joe felt Lisbeth's stark eyes watching him. The only fear in their wide gray depths was for him. Her mouth trembled a little.

"Joe, what have these people done?" she asked quietly.

"Stickup and murder at the drug-gist's. I walked into it, hon."

"What do they want with us?"

"I can identify them. You, too, now. They want us and our car as long as we're useful. Then. . . ." He shrugged.

Al said in a tight whine, "Come on, come on!"

"Go ahead, Joe," Lisbeth said. "I'll be all right."

Her hand felt cold as he squeezed her fingers.

HALFWAY to Mr. Smith's house, Corinne dropped her handbag in the snow, as she had done in the drug-gist's. Joe swung hard toward her, but she was fast, scooping up the gun and pointing it at him from her crouching position.

"Hold it," she panted. "Wait until I pick up this stuff."

The contents of her bag were scattered on the snow. Joe turned and walked away from her, toward the road, ignoring her gun.

She snapped out, "Hey, you! Wait!"

He kept walking. The girl didn't shoot. It would have raised an alarm throughout the whole camp, and she wasn't prepared to take the responsibility. He reached the road while she was still scrabbling around for her handbag equipment.

Mr. Smith, the proprietor, opened the door at the sound of his steps on the porch. The old man closed the door with care behind Joe's snowy figure and gestured him into the living-room office.

"Got your chains. Mr. Turner. Had to plow clean out to the barn for 'em, like I told your wife. Would've brought 'em to you myself, but she said you were at Gilberry's. You catch him open?"

"Yes, he was open. Will you get the chains, please?"

There was still no sign of Corinne. The old man muttered an excuse and padded into a back room. For a moment Joe was alone. A deer's head was mounted over the fireplace, where a cannel coal fire burned with an oil-crackling sound. The overstuffed furniture seemed to belong to another century. The only modern note in the room was the shining desk telephone.

Joe moistened his lips. Corinne was still absent. He turned his back to the window and moved toward the desk, his mouth suddenly dry. He was almost to the phone when Mr. Smith came back, staggering a little under the clanking weight of the tire chains.

"Here you are," the old man gasped. "They'll fit your car for sure." His faded eyes were filled with Yankee shrewdness. "Of course, considerin' the extra service and convenience of gettin' chains in this storm, I'll have to charge a little extra . . ."

"I'll take them," Joe said. He leaned on the desk, his body blocking the telephone from view of anyone at the window. "Listen, what's the name of this town, anyway?"

"Amesfield. The charge for them chains—"

"Do you have any law here?"

"Law? Only Constable Lukens. You got a complaint? Them chains are only being sold as a special favor—"

"No complaint," Joe said. "How can I reach him— Constable Lukens, I mean."

Mr. Smith snickered. "Be a mighty expensive call. He's gone to Florida." The old man's eyes had lost their friendliness. "Mebbe those chains ain't for sale, after all. What do you want the law for?"

"I'll take them. It's nothing to do with you."

"Well . . . just a minute." Mr. Smith turned and called toward the door leading back into the kitchen. "Hey, Tim! Come out here a minute, will you? Feller wants to see you!"

Joe looked toward the window and

cursed silently. Corinne was there, standing in the shelter of the house, out of the wind. She was watching him. Her head moved in an impatient, angry gesture, beckoning him to hurry. He nodded, turned back at the sound of heavy footsteps coming from the kitchen.

A tall, big blond man stood there, in the uniform of a Connecticut state trooper.

"This is Tim, my son-in-law," Mr. Smith explained, sliding back into the room from around the big trooper's bulk. "You can tell him your troubles, if you got any."

"What is it?" the trooper asked.

Joe's mouth was dry. This was it, this was the help he'd been praying for, the man with a gun, the Law. But out there in the snow and the darkness was Lisbeth, and there was no law to help her, and none he could bring to her in time.

He started to speak, not even knowing what he was going to say, and then was abruptly silent as the front door opened again and Corinne came quickly in. The redheaded girl looked disheveled from her walk in the snow. Her eyes jerked quickly over the three men, but she betrayed no surprise at the trooper's uniform. She turned toward Joe.

"Your wife is getting anxious about you," she said. "You'd better hurry back to her."

"That's right," Joe said. "I was just going. Thanks."

The trooper thumbed his leather belt and looked annoyed. "Pa said you wanted me for something, mister. What was it?"

"Nothing important."

Joe was conscious of Corinne's cold eyes upon him. Even if he took her now, it wouldn't help Lisbeth. If they didn't return, or if he and the trooper tried to steal up on the cabin, he had no doubt that Al and Ollie would carry out their threat to kill Lis, their hostage. He felt a smothering wave

of hopelessness as he bent to hoist the tire chains to his shoulder.

AND then he saw the unfinished chess game that stood before the fireplace. Somehow, he knew, he had to get help from the cop without alarming the girl. He acted even as he thought of it, walking over to the board where the red and black pieces stood in patient array. Casually, he picked up the black king and tossed it into the fire, turning to meet Mr. Smith's outraged exclamation. He hoped his voice was as casual as his gesture.

"The game is called, Mr. Smith. Black won't be over to collect your ten dollars."

Mr. Smith's mouth was open. "Ad Gilberry wouldn't pass up the chance. He wants his ten dollars—"

"Come on," Corinne said impatiently.

Joe nodded. "See you later."

The trooper yawned. Smith looked at Joe and the girl, and shrugged. Joe preceded the girl outside, the heavy chains sagging on his shoulder. He couldn't tell whether his words had meant anything to the Yankee. Perhaps Smith, in his natural thriftiness, would be content to let the matter lie, ignoring Adam Gilberry's unprecedented failure to appear for the chess game.

Stall for time, Joe told himself. You need help.

The trooper's car, a dark sedan, was parked in the plowed driveway. Joe hadn't noticed it there before. Corinne's footsteps crunched angrily beside him as he turned and plodded slowly into the drifts in the alley between the tourist cabins. He stopped to tie his shoelaces, then paused to readjust the tire chains, stretching out each precious moment. The girl tugged angrily at his arm.

"Wise guy," she said sharply, her voice breathless.

"I didn't tell them anything," said Joe.

"How do I know that? What was that cop doing there?"

"He's the proprietor's son-in-law."

The girl's voice was ugly with fear.

"Have they found the druggist yet?"

"He didn't say anything about it,"

Joe told her. He paused to face her.

"He just dropped in to see his family.

I didn't let him know anything. I'm not a fool. I want Lisbeth to get out of this safely. I don't want any trouble."

"You said that before," the girl said grimly. "But you got trouble anyway, plenty of it. Now let's step on it. I'm cold."

He walked as slowly as he could without arousing the girl's suspicion. The little cabin still glowed with light as they approached. Joe heard the throb of his car motor while they were still some steps away. The wind had drifted snow over his earlier tracks.

A huddled group stood in the slot between the cabins, and they turned as the cabin door was opened briefly, throwing light around Ollie's big bulk as he joined the others. The heavy car chains clanked as Joe lowered his hands from his shoulder. He looked for Lis, and saw her slender figure beside Al.

Corinne moved anxiously ahead of him. "Al, he got funny!" she cried.

Al's voice was quiet. "Yeah?"

"There's a state cop in the house. I don't know what the yokel told him, but we'd better get out of here, and fast!"

Ollie grunted, his huge figure towering beside Lis, in her ski suit. Al's face tightened and jerked around toward Joe.

"I didn't tip off the cop," Joe said slowly. "I told you I don't want any part of this business. I just want you to let me and my wife alone." He paused and drew a breath, talking to consume the passing moments. "If you want me to drive my car for you, okay. You've got the gun, so I can't argue. But you've got to leave my wife alone."

Lisbeth said warningly, "Joe. . . ."

"Shut up, baby," Ollie rumbled. "I think we got what we want from these clucks, Al. We got the car. Let's roll."

"Do we take them with us?"

"We'll take the dish," Ollie said.

Joe said: "No."

The wind whipped stinging sleet into his face. The chains sagged on his shoulder. How many minutes had it been since he'd left her Mr. Smith?

"I'll string along with you, because I have to. I want to get home to my kids, and I want to get my wife home safely. But don't push me too far."

"Listen to him," Al sneered. "You ain't in any position to say what you'd like, brother. We're taking you and your wife along with us."

"No," Joe said again.

SOMEHOW he knew that this was it, that this was a time for a decision, this minute, right now. He wasn't going to get any help. Mr. Smith hadn't been warned by his action with the chessboard. The state trooper was probably drinking coffee in the kitchen over there now, totally unconcerned or unaware of the presence of murderers nearby.

It was up to Joe, himself. He'd been pushed around enough, but he didn't mind taking a beating alone. It was Lisbeth who mattered, getting her home safely to the twins who waited for them.

He watched Ollie open the car door and put his hand on Lisbeth's arm to push her in. Al, with the gun in his hand, blinked into the driving snow. Corinne started around the car to get into the front seat. They took it for granted that Joe would be as docile as he had been all along. For the briefest moment Al's eyes flickered sideways, watching Corinne.

Now, Joe thought.

He was still holding the tire chains, the steel links slung over his shoulder. In the moment that Al was off guard, Joe jerked the chains free and swung them in a hard, swift arc across the space between them. He used every



ounce of strength in him, and the heavy links smashed the gun out of Al's hand and sent it spinning into the snow.

Al screamed in pain as bones broke in his hand, and then Joe was moving fast, not toward the little man but toward big Ollie, where the real danger lay. He wasn't at all sure he could take the big hood, but he had the advantage of surprise.

Ollie was still turned to the car to force Lisbeth inside when Joe threw the chains. The big man was twisted around when Joe reached him, floundering in the snow. Ollie threw a wild, crushing punch that whistled wide as Joe ducked, and then Joe's fist slogged into the big man's middle.

He might as well have swung at the Rock of Gibraltar. He felt the jar up to his shoulders, and his fist went numb. Ollie grunted and stepped back. Lisbeth cried out in fear. From the corner of his eye, Joe saw her grappling with Corinne as the redhead frantically searched her bag. Al was

on all fours in the snow, groping for his gun and exhaling curses with each painful breath.

Joe had no time to see anything else. Ollie lunged clumsily for him. Lisbeth cried a warning, but Joe wasn't the same man who had offered a compromise with the killers a few moments ago. His attack was swift and punishing, his right slamming Ollie back against the car, his left driving again to the man's middle.

It did no good. He slipped on the treacherous ice, and Ollie's big hands closed on him. Something exploded against the side of his head, and the night whirled crazily around him. Despair tasted bitter in the back of his throat. He was aware of further scuffling, a man's scream of rage, the dull, flat report of a gun. Joe found himself on hands and knees in the snow, shaking his head to clear it.

Incredibly, the trooper was there then, staggering through the snow behind the car to reach Ollie. The big gunman had his weapon in his hand. He was leaning against the car, his chest heaving, smoke leaking from the revolver. He was using Lisbeth as some sort of protective shield, so the trooper couldn't shoot.

The trooper dived at him, and Ollie's gun roared again, and Joe summoned the last of his strength to knock the gun up even as Ollie squeezed the trigger. The shot went wild.

The trooper slammed into Ollie from one side, Joe from the other. Ollie staggered and went down under their combined assault. His arms

spread wide and he slid down into the drifted snow. He didn't move at all.

Joe whirled to Al, but there was no more danger from that quarter. The little man had passed out from the pain of his broken hand. Lisbeth had somehow found the gun lost in the snow. Her white face stared at Joe anxiously as she covered the trio.

"Joe?"

"I'm all right, honey. Everything is fine." He looked at the trooper, who was snapping cuffs on Ollie. "I'm not hurt, honey."

He took Al's gun from her, and his left arm went around her shoulders. Corinne, the redheaded girl, was shivering violently, her face distorted by fear.

"Look, I didn't have anything to do with them—they made me go along, y'understand? Give me a break . . ."

The trooper slogged up through the snow. "Save it for the judge, sister." He nodded toward Joe. "That was nice work, mister. Pa figured you were trying to tell us something with that business of the chess game. I ran down to Gilberry's and then came back here as fast as I could. You all right now? You sure?"

"We're fine," Joe said, holding Lisbeth.

He picked up the chains he had thrown at Al and stowed them carefully in the back of the car. No sense taking chances. It would be a tough drive home in the snow tomorrow, and the twins were waiting for them.

Side by side with Lisbeth, backs to the driving snow, he watched the state trooper take over.



Duck Death

By
MARGARET RICE



Joe Holliday, detective, had seen everything. But he got the surprise of his life when a character needed help to get a duck. A live duck—for a man who would soon be a dead pigeon.

JOE HOLLIDAY was climbing into his coupé when someone asked, "Can you help me?" Joe swung around to see a short, fat man. The little man was well dressed and prosperous-looking, but he was obviously very distressed.

"About what?" asked Joe.

The guy in pin-stripes, frocktail coat and Homburg was strictly east of the Mississippi. Either that, or he ran one of Los Angeles' fancy funeral parlors.

"The pet shop across the street is closed," complained the guy, "and I must have a live duck right away. I don't know the city and wondered if you could direct me."

"Ducks are so important," replied Joe. "Especially in this day and age."

There was no malice in his lean hawk face. Joe was feeling good. A client had paid a fee. The detective business wasn't so bad after all. Anyway, he didn't have much malice.

The little man's round, placid face was unhappy. "I must have a duck," he stressed, "by three o'clock this afternoon."

"You have a half hour," pointed out Joe. Then he realized the other's very real anxiety. "Okay," he added, "hop in. I will get you a duck as obviously you need one."

The guy looked like he had been given candy. He climbed happily into the coupé and explained, "Being Sunday makes it difficult to get one. If I had known, I could have brought one from New York—I just flew in. I telephoned Cynthia when I arrived and she asked me to bring Uncle Ben a duck. He is rather eccentric. It seemed very vital to him."

Joe appraised his guest—the mild, well-bred moon face, neat clipped mustache and serious brown eyes. The guy was outfitted and mannered as if he ran banks for a living.

The coupé stopped at a swank chop suey joint that called itself Li Ting's Oriental Gardens. Li had an elegant setup with modernistic architecture, but he was strictly old-time San Francisco Chinese. Li kept live fowl in the basement since it was handier and cheaper that way.

As Joe parked, his little passenger protested, "A restaurant! Oh no, the duck must be alive."

"It will be," assured Joe. He went in the front door and asked the hat-check girl, "Where's the boss?"

The old man was in a carefully appointed office that radiated decor. Li was gracious. He sold Joe a duck for only two dollars more than it would cost at the market.

"Thanks," said the detective. "I suppose this includes the blue-ribbon pedigree."

"It is good business," replied Li without anger.

"It sure is," agreed Joe. But he didn't worry.

His little friend peeled bills off a giant-sized bankroll. The duck was hard to handle even with its feet tied. It had a pair of beady eyes and a mean, hissing tongue. Li made them take it out the back way.

"You are a jolly good sport," stated the little guy. "By the way, I am Seymour West of New York. I would like to have you come along and meet Cynthia. Her Uncle Ben is having a party and you might be amused."

"I'm Joe Holliday," said the detective, "and I like being amused."

THE house was a big one in Beverly Hills. It was loaded with wasted dough. It might have been Tudor, but the architect must have considered expense and gone overboard with balconies. A grey-haired, sour-faced butler admitted them.

A woman was coming down the curved staircase. She was wearing a floating pink chiffon dress and on her it floated good. For forty, she was lovely with bright blue eyes, a fresh skin and a smile that meant a smile. Joe liked her.

"Seymour!" she cried. The meeting was very tender and romantic. Then she saw the duck and said to the butler, "Charles, take it to my room and make sure it can't get out. I'll take it to Uncle Ben when he awakens from his nap. I can't imagine what he wants with it."

"Neither can I," mused Charles in a mournful voice. "It beats me." He vanished with the creature.

Cynthia was so happy, and it made Joe feel happy too. And he hadn't had a drink for three hours.

"I've brought a friend to the party," said Seymour. "Cynthia, Miss Howard, this is Mr. Holliday."

"I'm delighted you are here, Mr. Holliday," she replied, "but the party is off. Uncle Ben changed his mind a few hours ago and I telephoned every-

one not to come. But that doesn't mean we can't have a party." The butler had returned and she said, "Charles, please bring champagne and things to the library. Seymour, we are celebrating your being here."

It was obvious that Seymour wanted to be alone with his girl, so Joe said, "Nice flowers out there on the patio," and angled in that direction.

"Be in the library within twenty minutes," called Cynthia. "Remember, we're having a party."

Joe wondered why the two didn't get married. It was so obvious they were in love. He strolled around the patio, enjoying the place—it was loaded with loveliness. Then his eyes turned from the scenery and lingered on a less lovely sight. A thin, very wrinkled old guy in a monstrous gray tweed coat was sitting in a deck chair—an arrogant, florid character with shaggy gray hair and burning brown eyes. Joe got no greeting. He figured this was Uncle Ben.

"Nice day," ventured Joe.

"Hand me my golf cap," ordered the old guy. Joe complied. The man clamped it hard on his head and growled, "Who are you?"

"Nobody," returned Joe honestly. "But I got some simple aspirations."

"Sit down."

JOE sat down. He didn't feel like visiting with characters but he had twenty minutes to kill before assaulting the champagne in the library.

"I'm Ben Howard," said the guy. "Ever sail around the Horn?"

"No," admitted Joe.

Uncle Ben snapped, "That's the trouble with young folks these days. Never do anything—no real men anymore."

"The way we live," explained Joe without enthusiasm.

The character flashed some false teeth and cackled. "You're honest. Tell me this, have you ever been afraid of anything?" He drank from the glass that was on the near-by table.

"Sure," admitted Joe. "But an inventory would take too long."

The brown eyes burned brighter. A claw came out of the coat. "I'm afraid of just one person," the old man said. "But that person is afraid of only one thing." Then he coughed harshly, his eyes rolled up in his head, and he died.

Joe stared. Uncle Ben was dead. Living breath had suddenly left that old body. Joe checked. There was no use calling doctors. It made him rather sick. It had happened so suddenly. The old guy looked as though he had enough fire for ten years more.

Joe stared at the empty glass on the table. He picked it up and sniffed. Brandy—and something else. Joe got curious—maybe it was medicine but then he knew for sure it wasn't. No one ever took cyanide for medicine. Uncle Ben had been murdered.

Joe hated to interrupt the love scene—it was very touching. Seymour looked like a fat operatic tenor about to burst into song. It was tough to break the news and follow up with the suggestion to call the cops. Everything was rough for a few minutes.

Charles entered saying, "Mr. Jones is here."

Cynthia said, "Show him in, please." She had dignity that Joe liked. Seymour was doing a nice job of comforting her.

A smooth, well-fed character in striped pants and a swallowtail coat entered. Pink-faced and blond with blue shining eyes, he radiated polish. He looked like a guy going to a party and that's what he was because he said, "Am I too early? Where is everyone? It is three-thirty and the invitation said three to six."

"Didn't I call you?" Cynthia asked. "I thought I called everyone."

"Why, no?" the well-fed character replied. "At least, I never got the message." He got very disturbed as though the party had meant much to him—like a kid having been told there was no Santa Claus.

Cynthia fought back some tears

and managed to explain, "Uncle Ben called it off. There were fifty people on his list and I must have slipped up. Logan, Uncle Ben is dead!"

Logan Jones stared at his hostess and said slowly, "I'm frightfully sorry, Cynthia; I didn't know. Well, I'll shove along now."

Joe prevented Logan Jones from leaving. "Stay a while," he advised. "Uncle Ben was murdered. The cops will want to see everyone on the premises. If you aren't here when they come, they'll send out a dragnet for you. It's routine with them."

Logan agreed that it was wise he stay.

Joe called the police. Cynthia and Seymour went into the sun room. Logan glanced after them and said, "I'll wait in the living room."

Joe finally joined the couple. He figured he might as well be busy although he wasn't employed on the case. The police detective in charge would be a grim, bald number named Elsing. Joe wished he could get real smart and solve things. Well, he could try. Elsing had nothing but insults for private detectives.

"Uncle Ben have any enemies?" he asked.

"Loads of them," mused Cynthia. "He was a cutthroat in business and in every aspect. He loved inviting people he hated and being nasty to them. They had to take it, too, because he had some hold over them."

"Do you have the party list?" asked Joe. "I'd like to see it."

"Why, yes," she replied. "It's on the desk in my room. I'll get it for you. Uncle Ben made it up and as usual, scribbled mean things about the people on it, not that I can remember just what."

AFTER she left, Seymour stated, "Cynthia didn't kill Uncle Ben—she couldn't hurt a fly. Certainly, she has no motive. She has plenty of money of her own—I know because I handle her financial affairs. She was

awfully good to that old pirate and he adored her."

The talk swung to stocks and bonds. Joe's investments were limited to two-buck bets at the dog races. Steel and oil quotations were fascinating but went on too long. Joe got worried. Cynthia had been away long enough to find a dozen lists and have a bath. So Joe decided to check.

Finally he found her in her room. She was lying unconscious on the floor. Someone had given her a vicious blow on the head. A bloody brass vase was on the carpet. She wasn't dead but her breathing was all wrong. Joe grabbed the phone and called Emergency.

Then he looked for the party list. Fresh ashes smoldered in the fireplace. Joe figured the assailant had eavesdropped on the downstairs conversation, had followed Cynthia and conked her and had burnt the list. The ashes were too fine to be checked with chemicals for clues. It was damned certain the killer was incriminated by the list.

Joe told Seymour to remain with Cynthia until the ambulance came. While waiting for the police and the ambulance to arrive, Joe thought he'd get in some work. There was the possibility that Cynthia had destroyed the list and beamed herself to cover up. Seymour had an alibi because Joe had been with him all the time. Maybe Cynthia had killed Uncle Ben and the lovebirds were in cahoots.

Joe didn't like this theory because he liked Cynthia. He would check on Charles and Logan Jones.

The butler was drinking beer in the pantry. His pale blue eyes were red as he said, "The master was a mean old devil but we got along." He noticed Joe eyeing the beer, and commented, "This is my own supply. I don't steal liquor from the family. Besides, they don't keep beer and all I can drink is beer."

"You been here the last thirty minutes?" asked Joe.

"No pixie has been drinking *them*,"

answered Charles, indicating the empty bottles. Joe got in routine questions about whether Charles had heard or seen anyone around. Apparently, the beer had absorbed Charles' full attention.

Logan Jones was parked in a huge chair in the living room. The radio was at a low tone. Logan seemed tied up in the broadcast of a prize fight.

"How much longer?" demanded Mr. Jones, his eyes very bright and annoyed, "must I wait here? I have things to do, and this fight is lousy. Hell, both of them should have knocked each other out forty minutes ago. Schultz had the Iron Man down on the nine count but the bell saved him. Why didn't he polish him off instead of going into a May dance?" Then Logan, in a bored voice, gave Joe a very precise account of what had occurred for the last forty minutes. A beautiful alibi, but it demanded checking.

Then Emergency and the cops arrived. Cynthia was discovered to be in a critical condition. Seymour begged permission to go with her but Elsing was tough.

"It took you a long time to get here," remarked Joe. "What did you do—detour by the way of San Francisco?"

"We got the wrong address," growled the cop, "and broke up a big crap game. Now that we're here, though, we aim to work. Give me your version, Holliday, then tell me the truth."

The usual cigar got planted in Elsing's iron jaws. While the cop lined up everyone, Joe got busy on the telephone in the next room. He called friend Ed at the radio station and asked, "Will you do me a favor?"

"I can't loan you more than fifty bucks," cheerfully returned Ed.

Then Joe launched into what he wanted. Ed whistled. Pretty soon Ed was reading a complete transcription of the Schultz-Iron Man fight. Joe clocked each incident. Logan Jones

had a swell alibi—he could not possibly have eavesdropped and then gone upstairs to bash Cynthia and burn the list. Joe got unhappy until Ed commented:

"It was a lousy fight. I don't know why they bothered to relay the broadcast."

"What do you mean?" asked Joe.

"Well, on any decent radio, the fight could have been heard at noon. I think they were nuts to make a transcription for three P. M. too."

JOE figured that Logan could have heard the noon broadcast and remembered it. As he hung up the phone, he began to feel himself getting excited. He went upstairs to Cynthia's room. The duck was sitting on the bed.

"Hello, chum," Joe greeted it. "You are going to be bait. Uncle Ben was afraid of someone who was afraid of something. Suddenly Uncle Ben wants a duck—and for what? It is a damned nice theory he was going to scare someone with something, and you're it."

Also, Joe knew that neither Cynthia, Seymour, nor Charles had showed fright at sight of the duck. He would try it on Logan. At least, he could test the theory.

It sounded crazy, but Joe had read books on psychology. He knew that some people were deathly afraid of heights, some went wild at sight of snakes or mice, some couldn't stand being in an elevator. Joe knew his phobias, all right. Well, he figured, maybe this guy couldn't stand seeing a duck. Maybe he'd been scared by one while a child. Joe hadn't come across exactly such a case in his books, but it could happen to a man, all right.

Elsing was hammering at Seymour, Logan and Charles. Quietly Joe put down the duck. The creature waddled into the room. Seymour noticed it with curiosity. Charles saw it but was intent on understanding Elsing's rapid-fire questions. Logan said,

"You again!" but betrayed no emotion. The duck wandered out the patio door.

"She's out of danger," cried Seymour to Joe. "Mr. Elsing telephoned and they said she would be all right. She has even regained consciousness."

"And doesn't know who slugged her," mourned the cop.

But Joe knew who had struck her and stolen the list. Logan Jones had just given himself away when he had remarked, "You again!" about the duck. The creature hadn't been out of the bedroom; therefore Logan must have seen it there. It didn't mean Logan had killed Uncle Ben but it was pretty damned sure he had slugged Cynthia and burnt the list. Joe wondered about Logan being afraid of the duck—he had to work on that.

He called Elsing out of the room and they passed words back and forth for a while. Elsing was a tough guy to sell. "You need more proof. If that guy gets a smart lawyer, he could tie it into knots. There isn't any evidence."

Joe sighed. "That I know. So I want you to co-operate with a trap."

"You and your traps!" snorted the cop. "You should be in the North Woods." He looked as though he wished Joe were there now. Finally he gave in. Charles likewise co-operated—the beer had put him into a blissful mood.

"This is just like a play, huh?" he asked. "It's pretend? You ain't goin' to keep me locked up or hang me or somethin' like that?"

"Not unless I get hard up for a suspect," grimly remarked Elsing. "If times get tough, I can pin a charge on Holliday."

It was announced that Charles was being taken to Headquarters for further questioning. Things looked dark for Charles. The police left. Joe managed to detain Logan.

"Well," said Logan with relief, "that is over." He looked quite cheerful.

"Not altogether," informed Joe, looking like a lazy hawk. "You see, I am sort of an amateur detective. Uncle Ben had a duplicate of the party list and I know where it is because he told me. But I didn't tell the cops about it. No siree, I'm solving the crime all by myself."

"You are?" stated Logan. "Where is it?"

Joe tried to look dumb and felt it wasn't hard. "I'm not telling anyone," he replied. "But I'm going to get it right now. Good-by, Mr. Jones. Nice meeting you."

JOE ambled slowly out of the room. The house was deathly still now. The stairs seemed a mile long. Joe reached Cynthia's room. He opened the door and went inside. The duck that had been planted there waddled toward him.

"If you don't scare Logan Jones enough," Joe told it, "I will fit you into a roasting pan."

He pretended to read a piece of paper that he took out of the desk drawer. The door opened very softly. It closed. Joe knew it was being locked outside by a cop. He was alone with a possible killer and the duck.

"I want that paper," came the gentle whisper. The fat face breathing on him was wet dough now. Joe felt perspiration too. Logan Jones had a gun. The detective had been positive that Jones wasn't packing a rod.

"Where did you get that?" asked Joe. "At the corner drug store?"

"It belonged to Uncle Ben," replied Logan. "I got it out of his room."

"I know why you want the list," prompted Joe.

"Give it to me," was the cold demand.

Joe dropped it but picked it up. Also, he picked up the duck that was hidden in the big wing chair. "Okay,

I don't argue with guns," said Joe. He didn't like the inhuman look in Logan's eyes.

"You'll never argue with anyone again," replied Logan Jones as Joe moved forward.

Then the duck quacked. Logan's hand trembled. "Put down that thing," he said, his voice nervous.

tically he pulled at the door but his gun-hand was still pointed at Joe.

The detective saw it now—why Logan wanted the list because it was proof he hadn't been invited to the party. Joe remembered when Logan had first arrived and had made it clear he had been invited. Logan wanted the list because he was afraid



Joe put down the duck, but so close to Logan that it touched the guy's pants. Logan let out a yelp as though a rattlesnake had bit him.

"Get away from me," he cried as he backed to the door. The duck followed.

"Uncle Ben didn't get time to scare you with the duck," stated Joe, "because you slipped cyanide into his glass of water."

Logan was frantic. He blubbered and trembled and mouthed meaningless words. But he held on to the gun and all Joe had was words. Joe kept talking fast and finally what Logan was saying made sense.

"I had to kill him," whimpered Logan as he tugged at the locked door. "He would ruin me! That damned party—I had counted on it to distract attention from me—I didn't know it had been called off. I hadn't even been invited. That damned party!" Fran-

of being suspected if he would be caught in a lie.

The duck brushed against Logan and the guy yelled in terror, "Get away from me!" He shot at the duck and missed. He shot at Joe. Wildly, he shot around the room. Then Elsing came out of the dressing closet. The cops took over.

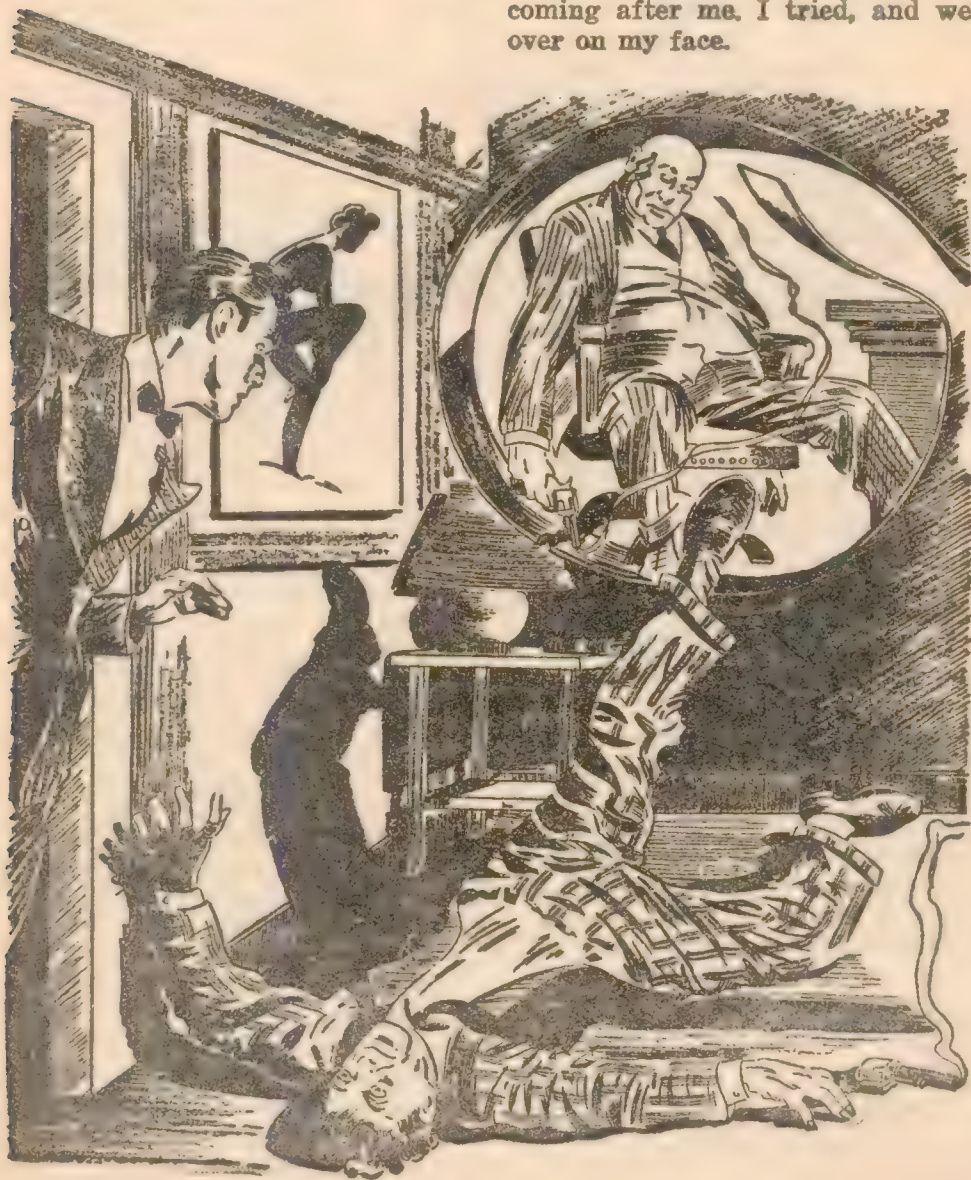
Later, downstairs in the library, Elsing mused, "That guy was certainly scared of the duck. Well, we got a full confession." He looked at the duck that was sitting in the big comfortable lounge chair. "You may be evidence," he told it, "but you can't have the best chair in the house." He pushed it off and sat down. Joe took a hard, straight-backed chair. Elsing sat there puffing away at a cigar as though he had solved the crime, but suddenly he looked unhappy. He got up. The duck had laid an egg. Joe felt very happy.

Has Anybody Here Slain

Liz Kelly made a lovely corpse. Idol of a million fans, she was killed to keep a secret. But instead, her death exploded over the movie colony like a gruesome premiere.

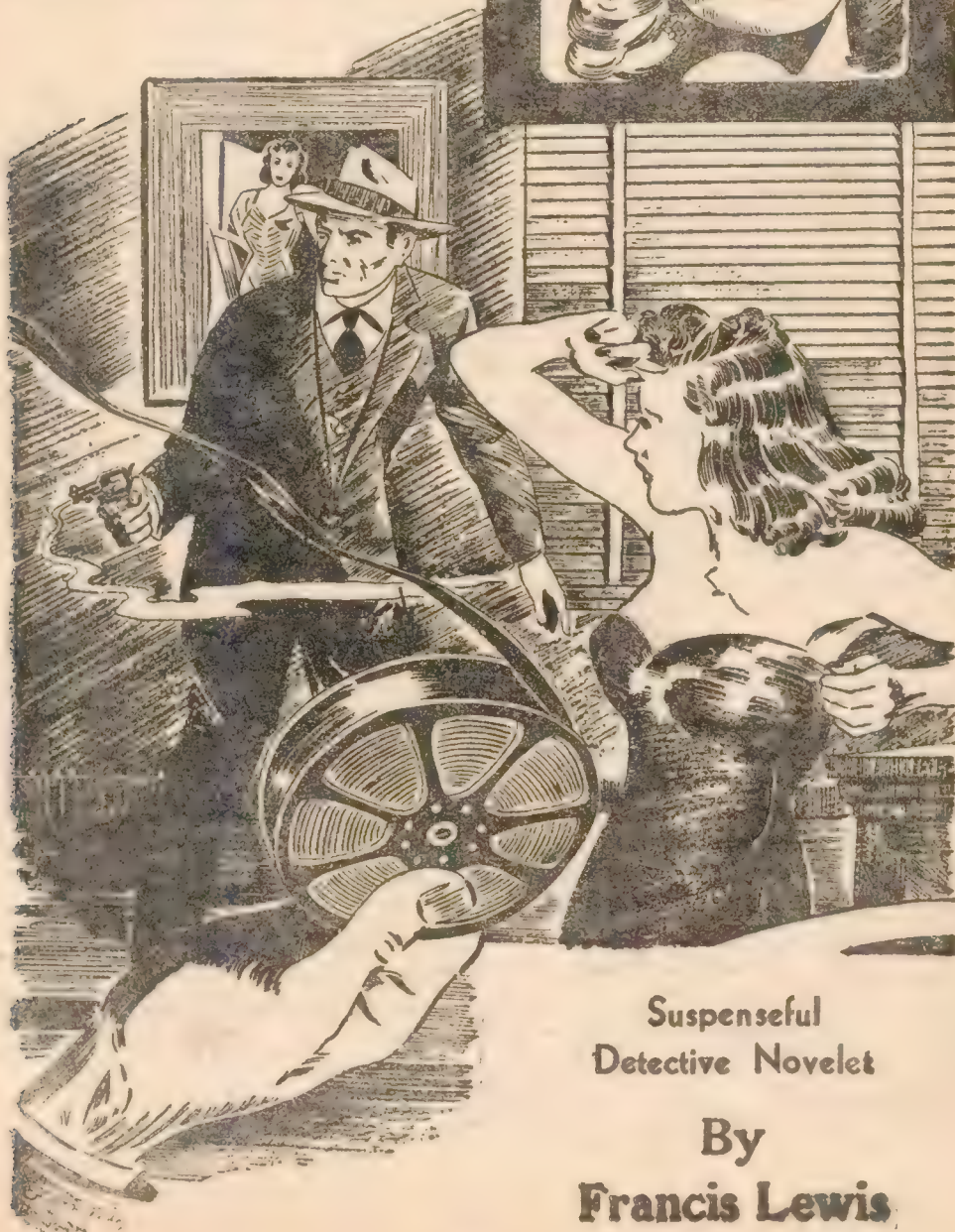
I

EVERYTHING was all right at first, but then the ground under me turned into soft marshmallow. My feet kept getting stuck and it was hard to run, but I had to run because the skeleton and the cowboy and the ballet dancer were coming after me. I tried, and went over on my face.



Kelly?

I lay there a few minutes, trying to get my bearings and wondering what kind of world I was in where the air was full of sizzling, flashing, blinding lights. Then the lights cleared away and the air was just plain air, and the skeleton and the cowboy and the ballet dancer were



Suspenseful
Detective Novelet

By
Francis Lewis

with me again. They were bending over me.

The skeleton spoke first. His voice was funny because it was so usual—nasal and with a touch of Brooklyn, out of a death's-head.

"What's the matter, mister?" he said. "You sick?"

I stared at the blurry death's-head and the painted bones up and down his frame until they steadied, and I said, trying to grin, "What're *you* made up for?"

Before he answered, I knew—because I was beginning to feel better and I remembered where I was. I was just outside Stage C at *Olympus Studios*, and the skeleton and cowboy and ballet dancer were walk-ons in the Dance Fantasy scene being filmed that day for *Aurora and the Lions*.

I cut his reply off: "Was I out long?"

The skeleton said, "Why — why, ten minutes maybe. We figured you was takin' some kind of fit . . . and we didn't know whether it was safe to move you or not. Sometimes it ain't." He stared as I started to get to my feet. "Maybe you better sit still, mister. You smacked your head fallin' down. We saw you weavin' and ran over to you, but we weren't fast enough. One of the boys just went for a doctor . . ."

The lights were coming back again and the ground was feeling soft once more under my feet, but I forced myself to stand erect.

"Nothing," I said, forcing the words thickly out of my throat. "It's nothing . . . touch of . . . dizziness. Can't wait now."

I stumbled away from them, fighting the black hole that was up to my knees and was trying to pull me in to the eyes. Fighting, fighting . . . an inch, another inch, a foot, couple of yards. . . .

It was less than a block from Stage C to Liz Kelly's dressing room, but to me it was like crawling on your stomach through barbed wire for a million miles. But I couldn't black out

now, not with Liz's telephone call still fresh in my ears.

Then I was at the row of dressing rooms and pushing open the door to her room. I didn't knock; I didn't have the strength to knock. I pushed and went staggering inside, and stared bleary eyed at the room around me.

It was no good. It was no damn good at all. I might just as well have skipped the dragging, struggling crawl to her dressing room, and gone on sprawling outside Stage C on my face.

Liz Kelly was lying at my feet, her beautiful body twisted and stiff with death. A bullet up close had blown away part of her head.

LIZ KELLY. Elizabeth Kelly to her fans, and there had been millions of them—millions of kids and grown-ups and old people who ran to see her pictures and walked away raving each time.

Liz Kelly. Twenty-four, and medium-tall and straight and slim and long-haired blonde and sweet.

Liz Kelly, corpse.

Ten minutes dead; part of her head shot away while I was draped outside Stage C counting flashing lights. It wasn't easy to take.

I discovered suddenly that I was wilting again and I fought away the black mist, forced myself to think. And even through the fog, one thing came out clear as spring-water:

When the dizziness had hit me outside C, I'd figured I was coming down with something — malaria, maybe, making a return visit, something like that. Now I knew that it was malaria in a pig's eye. No, my dizziness was a lot less accidental than the sudden return spurt of an old Army disease, turning up just in time to slow me down so someone could give Liz Kelly her passport upstairs.

No, it was simple, simple as hell when you looked right at it. Someone had overheard or listened in on Liz's urgent call to me and had given

me a quick spurt of knockout juice in my luncheon coffee so that I wouldn't get to Liz until she was past the talking stage.

Well, I thought wryly, leaning against the wall to support myself, that ought to make it a cinch. Nothing to it. Even a tired studio private bull like you ought to be able to figure this one out. Just figure out who could have gotten to your coffee and you've got your killer.

Nice and easy. There were only about sixteen hundred people in the commissary at lunch time. Bit players, technicians, writers, producers, actors, actresses, visitors. And with glad hello's and table-hopping the second most popular sport in Hollywood, next to chasing the opposite sex, that narrowed the field down very nicely. Only about—say—fifteen hundred and ninety of them could have put the drops in the coffee.

I cursed bitterly and staggered over to the phone. I dialed L. A. Homicide and, in a voice that was harder and harder to get out, I told Bryans there what had happened.

Then, all at once, it was too much for me. I retched, staggered blindly forward, and hit the floor with my face.

I was lying on a couch and my face was soaking wet and someone was saying my name, over and over again, over and over again.

"Joe," the voice said. "Joe McCloud." Over and over again.

It began to annoy me. I said, "Go to hell."

A rag slapped me limply in the face, and I was wetter.

"Joe," the voice said again. "Joe boy."

I opened one eye and looked around a little. Bryans was leaning over me, breathing beer down my neck. I was still in Liz's room.

It woke me up. I opened the other eye.

"Liz," I said.

Bryans looked at me, gentle for

such a big guy. "You feeling better, Joe?"

"Liz," I said hoarsely. "Someone got Liz. She's dead on the floor there."

"Not any more, Joe," Bryans said gently. "The medics took her downtown." He breathed down my neck again. "She was a nice kid, Joe. Who got her?"

Ice filled my throat. I'd been groggy before, but now I was awake and strong enough to hate.

"I wouldn't be here if I knew, Bryans," I said.

"You liked her, didn't you, Joe?"

"A little," I said bitterly. "Like you like a casual friend. That's why we were getting married next Sunday."

"I didn't know about that, Joe," Bryans said.

I turned away from him. "Let it pass."

HE WAS silent for a minute and then he said, "We'll get the guy who sent her out, Joe—but you got to give us a hand. You got to tell us what you know. What were you doing in her dressing room in mid-day? I always heard Miss Kelly was nervous at lunch time when she was shooting a big scene, and she hardly saw anybody."

"She sent for me, Bryans," I said. "She phoned me at the commissary and I took the phone right at the table, like a big shot, so everybody could hear. Only I didn't know she was going to ask me to rush right over because she was in some kind of trouble—danger was the way she put it . . ."

"Go on, Joe."

"There isn't much more. I rushed right over, but on the way I got sick." I told him about it, about the coffee, about the fact that there wasn't the chance of an icicle in a hotbox of getting the guy who did it on the basis of opportunity. "Only," I finished, "I got here too late."

He looked thoughtful. "Who hated her, Joe?"

"Nobody," I said.

"That's crazy, Joe," he said. "Everybody's hated by somebody. I guess maybe you're the wrong guy to ask a question like that."

I sat up, shook my head to clear it.

"Look, Bryans," I said, "the fact that I was going to marry her hasn't got a damn thing to do with it. Bryans, you've been around this town a long time. You know movie stars. They make a bunch of grand a week, so they marry other movie stars who make a bunch of grand a week, or they marry millionaires or other kinds of big shots. They don't marry private eyes who peddle their guts for a mere couple of hundred bucks a job.

"Liz was going to marry a private eye, this private eye. She was going to marry me because she loved me and because I loved her. That's the kind of gal she was. . . ."

Bryans put up a hand. "Now don't get sore, Joe."

"I'm not getting sore," I said. "I'm just trying to show you what kind of gal she was so you can understand this damn thing and lick it if I don't."

"Bryans, this burg is loaded with phonies and bushwah-artists and guys and dames out for themselves and the hell with everybody else. But every once in a while someone completely decent turns up. That was Liz. She got where she was by ability, and not by making a ladder out of other people; and she never did anyone dirt in her life. That's why nobody hated her—nobody."

He looked convinced, and more gentle than ever. "All right, Joe," he said. "If you're up to it, let's get out of here so I can lock up the joint. I want to do a little nosing around."

I walked with him to the door and then I left him. I told him I felt like hell and wanted to go home. I didn't go home.

Because even while I'd been tell-

ing him about Liz, funny thoughts had been pushing and shoving around in my mind. Thoughts like this: You don't have to be a punk and a louse to have people hate you. Sometimes people hate you because you're just the opposite.

People, I thought—and I walked a little faster because I thought it—people like Gwen Christie, who'd lost a number of important parts to Liz because Liz was a hell of a lot better actress, and who had hated Liz's guts for it.

And Dickie Lawrence, who managed Liz's publicity, who made no secret of that fact that he was hanging onto his job because he needed the dough, but hated Liz because she would never agree to the stunt publicity he was always thinking up.

Or people like Martin Rennick, top producer at *Utopia*, who had a wife and a couple of kids but spent more time making other women than making movies, and hated Liz because he had never been able to get anywhere at all with her.

Or Tommy Del Rey, the great screen lover, who made women swoon off the screen as well; and the ones he chased hardest were the not too many who didn't go for him. He hated Liz most because she had been his biggest failure.

Maybe you don't think people kill for reasons like these. Maybe, brother, you don't know a damn thing about exaggerated emotions in Hollywood.

I went to the commissary first, and that information I got there was just about right to make me want to kick my leg into a wall up to the knee. I knew that all four of them—Gwen Christie, Dickie Lawrence, Martin Rennick, Tommy Del Rey—had been at the commissary when I was there. I'd seen them myself. But the information I got fixed that up fine. All four had left minutes after I had; all four had gone off in different directions.

Lovely. That pinned it down: in a horse's fetlock it did.

I went to make the rounds.

II

GWEN CHRISTIE'S dressing room was located just down the road from the commissary. She got the pleasure of my company first. She answered the door herself, and she took my hand and went inside with me and then she turned to face me.

"Joe," she said, "I've just heard. I'm so sorry." She came up close to me as she said it. Close as wallpaper to a wall.

She always stood close when she talked to a young and, she possibly figured, impressionable man. It was part of her character and her stock-in-trade and the reason for her success. She made every man in the theater feel as though she were sitting on his lap during the entire performance, and after each showing of her pictures the men's lounge would be full of harassed gentlemen dipping their heads under the cold water spigots.

Her face was dark and passionate-looking, and she had hot, dark eyes, and long black hair. She had the kind of tall figure you see in those dreams you later discuss with your psychoanalyst, and she made it look twice as wonderful by wearing dresses two sizes too tight.

All in all, she made you feel as if the top of your head was floating around by itself in mid-air.

It was easy to look at her and forget everything else you had on your mind. But not today. I said, "Gwen, let's you and me have a little talk."

She stepped over to a little love seat in one corner of the room, sat down on it, and motioned to the space beside her. I sat down, and she moved over so close she was almost on my lap, and her fingers began to play, carefully, absently, with my earlobe.

"Gwen," I said, "I don't have to tell you how I felt about Liz. I'm out to

get the guy who killed her. How about giving me your picture on who did the job?"

"I don't have any pictures," she said quickly. "I don't have the faintest idea. I was so shocked and horrified when I heard it."

I interrupted her harshly. "Save the pretty lines for your pictures," I said. "You wouldn't be shocked and horrified if the Archangel Gabriel put down his trumpet and chased you around the room. You're among friends, Gwen. How about your private opinion?"

"Private opinion for a private eye," she said. "All right. I'd cast my vote for Old Man Rennick."

Martin Rennick. One of my candidates. I looked interested.

"How do you figure?"

"The figuring's easy when you remember that he gives her looks that yearn at her and hate her at the same time every time she passes. It looks to me like he got desperate and followed her into her room; she put up a fight, maybe there was an angry scene, a lot of emotions thrown around, and he lost his head and blasted her. That's how it looks to me."

I thought it over. "It's a hell of a good possibility, anyway. I won't pass it up." Her lips were close to my neck now, but I kept my mind on business. "And now, just for the record, where were *you* after lunch today?"

She jerked away from me, and her face was suddenly white and strained and harsh. "You're out of your mind," she said.

"I told you it was just for the record."

She laughed, a forced laugh. "I came right here after lunch—straight here—and I haven't left this place since. I have a two-thirty call." She laughed again, but this time, unaccountably, it was a long and bubbling laugh, full of humor, as though she'd just thought of something which amused her immensely.

"Besides," she said, "I haven't been worrying too much about my career lately. I've got a brand-new boy friend who's been keeping my mind plenty occupied."

"Anybody I know?" I asked.

She laughed again, hilariously. "Stick to your beat, private eye. Worry about your case."

"Sorry," I said. "No offense." I stood up. "And if I'm to be worrying about the case, I'd better be moving along."

The wolf-girl came out in her again at that, and she pulled me back beside her.

"Wait a minute," she said softly. "Now that you're here, why don't you stay and rest a while?" She spaced the words, her mouth a little open, the tip of her red tongue darting between her teeth.

WELL, it was like this. I was sick and I was tired and I was burning with hatred for someone I couldn't even name, and I was all mixed up and didn't know where I was going, and those are the times when you're weakest. And her lips were very close to mine, and her eyes were half closed, and her chest was heaving faster and faster, and maybe you can whistle blithely when you walk through a graveyard but my emotions don't control quite that easily. At least not right now, when my nerves were as jagged and turbulent as a bolt of lightning.

I pressed my lips to hers and her body to mine. I was there all in all about half an hour.

The opportunity for which I'd been waiting turned up in mid-stream. Around the fifteen-minute point she went to the powder room, and I went quickly and expertly through her furniture. I was looking for something interesting, and I found something interesting.

I found a little envelope tucked away under some lingerie in a chest of drawers. It was empty and it was just an ordinary little cream-colored

envelope, but it had Liz's name and address printed on the flap, and it was part of a stationery set I'd given her the evening before.

I was feeling a little better when I went out of there.

Across the road and down the hill from the Commissary, there is a building which is all white marble and ultra-modern design, and just a shade smaller than the Hollywood Bowl. It could house a couple of dozen families or so. It houses just one man, Martin Rennick, and his various satellites.

I entered the outer office and told the blond dish behind the reception desk that my name was McCloud and I was investigating the death of Elizabeth Kelly. She bent over to write my name on a card, and I could see she really was built and very decorative as a receptionist.

"Wait here," she said. "I think he's in conference just now, but I'll try."

He was in conference. I could tell that by myself because she got to the door and jerked it, and it didn't move.

"He's locked his door on the inside," she told me. "You'll have to wait."

"Pleasure," I said.

I sat down in an easy chair which sank a foot and a half when you slumped into it. I sat and I watched the entirely visible charms of the receptionist, and I listened to the inside of Martin Rennick's office.

His conference wasn't a happy one. I could hear his deep voice rumbling and growing louder and louder in anger, and every once in a while he shouted a word or two that would have made a lady blush but bothered the receptionist not a bit.

There was another voice, too, a low and insinuating voice which I couldn't hear well enough to recognize. It said maybe two words to Rennick's fifty, but you could tell that Low Voice was the master of the situation.

Then I heard Rennick say, "All

right, all right. Now get the hell out of here." Footsteps retreated out of my hearing—probably toward one of the private exits to Rennick's inner office.

I got to my feet. "Conference is over," I said.

It was. The receptionist tried again, and this time the door swung open. She went inside and was gone about a minute and a half. She came out flushed.

"He'll see you, Mr. McCloud," she said.

Martin Rennick looked like Humpty Dumpty before he fell off the wall. He was a stomach topped by a bald head. He had glittering black eyes and a habit of licking his lips when he was nervous.

He was nervous now. His tongue worked like a pendulum of a clock.

"Poor Liz," he said, looking at me. "I liked her very much."

I stared at him, hard, and my mind said, *You ought to be on the radio, you little punk, the way you tell stories. You hated her because she wouldn't look at you.* But I didn't say it; I was being polite for the moment.

I said, "Who do you think did it, Mr. Rennick?"

"Did it?" he said. "Why ask me? I don't know a damn thing about her personal life"—his lips twisted—"if she had one. Why come to me?"

"You knew her pretty well, didn't you?"

The familiar glitter came into his eyes under the nervousness.

"Just to look at, actually," he said. "She was quite a tomato. Boy, for a babe like that—"

He stopped because his feet weren't on the floor any more. He was hanging in the air, supported by my left hand.

"How would you like to end up with your chin three feet into that wall?" I asked.

He began to sputter. "This is my office—my company—"

"She was my girl, Fatso," I told him. "Watch your lip."

I put him down and he began to wave speechlessly toward the door. I said, "Remember one thing, Fatso. You're Number One suspect on this job."

His face grew whiter. "Me?" he said. "You're crazy. I never left this office after lunch." His voice trailed off as he stared at his private exits.

"Yeah," I said. "I'll be seeing you again."

I slammed the door behind me, didn't even look at the receptionist, and began to walk toward Tommy Del Rey's dressing room. It was just inside the Jungle that the two men caught up with me.

III

THE Jungle is *Olympus Pictures'* attempt to prove that, though only God can make a tree, mere man can make a forest. The jungle was its pet name, but actually it was a five-block square forest which was used for shots where it wasn't quite necessary to go off on location.

I walked into it with my head so full of thoughts that I didn't even stop to think that when nothing was being filmed it was lonelier than the Frisco dockyards after midnight.

The two men were cut out of the same mold. They were both tall and blond and good-looking in a boyish sort of way, and they both looked like Richard Widmark playing gangster parts except that the bulges under their armpits contained real bullets instead of blanks. I recognized them right away—Rennick's "associates." Bodyguards, muscle-men, with a fancy title.

The bulge came out from an armpit and was a gun in one guy's hand. It was a .45, big and black, and he held it like he didn't intend to use it for cracking nuts.

"We want to talk to you, guy," the other bird said.

I played it tough. I slouched against a tree and said, "You're talking, guy."

"Just got one thing to tell you,

guy," he said. "Mr. Rennick don't like nobody snooping around him."

"No?"

"No. Mr. Rennick don't like you, neither, and guys he don't like sometimes end up with broken arms and legs and maybe a couple of teeth knocked out."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Mr. Rennick don't like it at all."

I looked at him for a minute, and managed to grin.

"Well," I said, "let me put it this way. That's the saddest damn story I ever heard, and I positively bleed for Mr. Rennick. But you just trot back and tell Mr. Rennick that I'm going to keep snooping around until the guy who killed Liz Kelly is sniffing a noseful at San Quentin."

"You mean that, guy?"

"Guy," I said, "I mean it like anything." And I straightened up and balled my fists.

It went off nicely. When you ball your fists at a rodman he does one thing automatically—he gets ready to use his rod. And when he gets ready to use his rod, and he's got a big rod like a .45 with a kick like the atom bomb, he pulls his arm over to his side to tense it. His arm had been out in front of him, pointing the gun, and it passed his stomach en route to his side.

Quick as hell I unballled my right fist, grabbed the muzzle of the gun and pushed forward hard. The gun went into his stomach and wind whooshed out of his lungs and he was wide open for a second. I used my left to follow it up.

He went down, groaning, and his rod was out of his hand into mine before his pal could stop blinking. I used it to play a tune on the other guy's head and he lay down, cozy and nice, right alongside his pal.

"Guys," I said to their sleeping bodies, "I keep snooping." I emptied the gun, threw it down on the ground, and walked away.

Well, maybe Rennick was worth

another confab before I went on to Del Rey and Lawrence. He had looked nervous when we talked before, and his sending his boys didn't make him out a brave, calm lad either. Anyhow, it was worth another try.

I WENT back to Hollywood Bowl's kid brother. The girl at the reception desk was out trimming her fingernails or something, but the other girl on duty had a figure that was worth a whistle too. I ignored her worried yapping and pushed through into Rennick's office.

Rennick was sitting at his desk, his head in his hands. He looked like he was almost crying.

"I just came back to tell you to pick up your boys, Fatso," I said. "They're enjoying a quick snooze out in the Jungle."

He was more nervous than ever. His tongue was doing double duty over parched lips, and his face was white and his eyes hollow. He said, "Leave me alone, McCloud. I'm sick."

I walked toward him. "You're going to be sicker in a minute," I said. "I don't like guys who send guys to threaten me."

Then I stopped, because I had had a sudden thought.

"Rennick," I said, "who was that in with you when I was waiting last time?"

I watched his face grow old before my eyes. His cheeks sagged and his lips began to tremble. I thought suddenly, *This is what he's really afraid of. Not so much being accused of Liz's murder. This. The guy with the low voice.* Rennick didn't say a word.

I said, "Rennick, if you're in trouble of some kind, you'd be smart to tell me about it. If it's connected with Liz, I'm bound to smell it out anyhow."

"No," he said, his voice a croak. "No, please . . . No . . ."

"Don't be a damn fool," I said. "I'm not stopping until I get Liz's killer. Tell me about it, Rennick. If it isn't

connected with Liz, I'll keep it quiet, and maybe I can give you a hand."

"That's just it," he said. "I don't know. I—" He stopped and took hold of my shoulder with a trembling hand.

"Look, McCloud," he said, "I'm frightened—I'm going crazy—I don't know where to turn. Maybe it would be best to tell you, I don't know. But I've got to think." His whole body was shivering now. "McCloud, do me a favor—go out and sit in the reception room for a few minutes. Let me sit here and think this out. I'll call you in as soon—as soon as I've decided. . . ."

I went. Nothing, no intuition, came to me, and I went as he asked me to, and I sat down and waited, watching the door and the secretary and back to the door again.

I had been sitting there for about ten minutes when I heard the shot. I didn't stop to think but rushed to the door and slammed against it. It didn't give. It was locked, and it was heavy.

It took three hard heaves to knock it down. I finally got it open and rushed into the room. I didn't have to be a medic to see that Rennick's secret was going to stay with him. He had very little forehead left.

There was a difference this time. There'd been no gun in Liz's room. There was one now, clasped tightly in Rennick's right hand.

It looked like suicide.

Belatedly, and just for the hell of it, I opened the three doors which led out to Rennick's private exits and looked down them. Not a thing. I followed one down a long corridor and it opened out into *Olympus's* main thoroughfare. Fat chance of getting witnesses to tell me anything—there were other exits alongside, and it could have been anybody, just coming out and mixing with the crowd.

I went back into Rennick's office and it still looked like suicide. It was certainly possible: Rennick sits there and broods about his troubles and

finally he pulls his heater out of his desk drawer and gives himself the lead treatment.

With a handkerchief I pulled the gun out of his hand and broke it open. Even before I looked I knew I would find two bullets fired, though I'd heard only one shot. It would take ballistics to prove it, but this, brother—and I'd bet on it—was the rod that had killed Liz.

It shaped up smooth and believable. A guy gets a yen for a girl, the kind of yen that drives him crazy, and he sneaks into her room and tries to play up to her. She puts up a fight, maybe gets hysterical, threatening to expose him or some such thing, and he loses his head and cools her. Then he broods about it, decides the quick way out is better than the gas chamber, and blows his brains out. It sure looked like suicide.

To me, it smelled like murder.

Sometimes you forget little things. You find a perfect opportunity to murder a guy who's dangerous to you, and you rig up a deal to make it look like suicide, and you forget he's a left-handed guy and stick the shooting iron in his right hand. Stupid, but it happens. It's so obvious, it's bound to happen more than you think.

The receptionist's assistant had fainted on the floor just outside the door. I stepped over her and used her phone to call the studio police. I told them to locate Bryans and send him over to Rennick's office.

Then I went on my way.

I WENT to Tommy Del Rey's dressing room.

I didn't find Tommy Del Rey.

I found Dick Lawrence, bending over a chair inside Del Rey's dressing room. Dick was so busy doing something to it that he didn't even hear me come in.

"Hey!" I said.

He jumped up and made a sort of squeaking sound. He was a little

mouselike guy who squeaked all the time.

He said, "Oh, it's you. I thought it might be Del Rey."

"What in hell are you doing?" I asked.

A silly grin spread over his face. "Just installing this," he said, pointing. He had a round black object, sort of a cushion, in his hand and he was busy inserting it under the cover of the chair.

"This is the Squealing Surprise," he said. "Hell of a funny thing. You put it on chairs and people sit on it, and it makes a loud burping sound. Scares the wits out of them."

He thought it was so funny he almost doubled over.

That summed up Lawrence, characterized him in a nutshell. A jerk who spent half his time playing silly practical jokes on people. He probably spent twenty per cent of his salary each week on gimmicks like the Squealing Surprise.

It was an effort to say it mildly, but I said mildly, "Sweet time to be schmoing around playing jokes on people—with Liz's body hardly cold."

His face sobered immediately, but you could tell it was an act of duty. Well, after all, I thought, he's one of your suspects because he hated her; what can you expect?

He said, "Yeah—poor Liz. I can't believe that it's really happened. Poor, poor kid. I can imagine how you feel, McCloud."

"Knock it off," I said. I waited a second. "Same guy got Rennick, too, Lawrence."

His voice turned into a shrill scream. "Rennick! Holy Hannah, when?"

"Couple of minutes ago. Same rod. Tried to make it look like suicide, but it won't wash. Rigged it up okay but put the gun in the right hand when Rennick's a leftie."

I watched the color wash out of his face. "Nobody's safe around here,"

he yapped. "Nobody. Where—where did it happen?"

"In his office."

He scrambled to his feet. "I'm going over there. There'll be cops—protection. Maybe it's a homicidal maniac. I'm going over..." He scuttled out of the room, his Squealing Surprise forgotten.

I went to work on the room, and in Del Rey's chest of drawers I found what I expected to find. A little lucky gold locket that Liz never took off.

It was shaping up.

I went on the prowl for Del Rey.

IV

TURNABOUT, they taught me when I was a kid in school, is fair play. I had found Lawrence in Del Rey's room. I found Del Rey in Lawrence's.

He wasn't playing with practical jokes. His well-shaped handsome face was twisted bitterly and he was going through the desk methodically and carefully. He was cursing in a steady stream.

"Find it yet?" I said.

He jumped up. "McCloud!" he said.

"The same," I told him politely.

"What are you looking for, Tommy?"

His face grew ugly. "What's it to you? What in hell's your business?"

"I'm investigating Liz's murder. Anything screwy going on is my business."

He spit a nasty word at me.

I stepped closer to him. "What were you looking for, Del Rey?"

"Go to hell," he said.

I reached out and took hold of his arm and twisted it behind his back. I gave it pressure. "I'm getting sick and tired of playing around. What were you looking for?"

Tears of pain started in his eyes, but he didn't say anything. I gave the arm more pressure. Still more.

"All right," he yelped. I released the pressure. "He stole something from me, the little joke-playing rat, and I wanted it back. That's all I'll

tell you. You can break my arm, but that's all I'll tell you."

He meant it. I could tell that. "Okay," I said. "Scoot."

"What?"

"Scoot. Vamoose. Beat it. Scram. Take the air."

"But—"

"I said scoot. I'm going to give this place a going-over myself, and if there's anything to be found, I'll find it. If I find something of yours which doesn't concern Liz, you'll get it back and my mouth will stay closed. If it does, it's just too damn bad for you."

His shoulders slumped. He was licked. He gave me a look which put neat curls in my back hair, and he slammed out of the door.

I got busy.

That's the trouble with these amateurs, they look for something which they consider valuable or important and they look in places like desk drawers. From the look of things, Del Rey had been searching for at least ten minutes. I found what he wanted in two, pasted on the inside rear wall of the desk, where you had to pull out the drawer to see it.

It was a neat picture. It was a nice flash-photo of Del Rey and a gal I didn't recognize, and they seemed to be very friendly. My eyes dwelt on the girl for a minute or two, and then I put the picture in my pocket. I went back to my search.

In a suitcase which I had to break open, I found another photo which interested the hell out of me. This wasn't a flash job—it was one of those careful, painstaking things by Hugo of Hollywood, the kind that grace magazine covers and are forwarded to fans who sent two bits to the studio for return postage.

It was Gwen Christie, wearing just enough of a black negligee so that the Johnson office would pass the shot, but not enough so that the fans wouldn't get collar-wilt.

Gwen's handwriting was sprawled in white ink across the right-hand lower corner. The writing said:

To my dearest Dickie, with love for you alone, from your Gwen."

I remembered Gwen's comment about her interesting new boy friend, and her derisive laughter as she said it. I tied it in with this photo, fit the romance of the Amazon and the Mouse into the general scheme of things, and it looked about ready to wrap up.

I SIGHED, stood up, wiped the dust off my trouser legs, and went to the phone. I asked to be connected with Mr. Rennick's office and told the copper who answered to put me on to Bryans. The homicide dick came on with a bellow.

"McCloud," he roared, "where in hell are you? Everywhere you go somebody gets murdered, and I can't even locate you to ask you what the—"

I cut in wearily, "The yap, Bryans." "Huh?"

"The yap. Shut it. I'm ready to wrap this up for you."

It stopped him. We've worked together before. "Yeah?" he said eagerly.

"Yeah," I said. "Just do this—send your boy scouts out to round up Tommy Del Rey and Dick Lawrence and Gwen Christie, and hold them there for me."

"Lawrence is here now," he said, "and we've already sent for Gwen Christie. I hear old Rennick used to be one of her boy friends."

"Everybody was a boy friend of Gwen's sometime or other," I said. "But hold her when she comes, and get Del Rey, too."

"Will do."

"All right," I said. "I'll be over in a couple of minutes." I was.

Lawrence and Gwen Christie were there waiting for me when I arrived. A couple of minutes later a cop came in walking politely beside Tommy Del Rey. That put all four of my suspects in the room with me, including the one who was no longer a sus-

pect, Rennick. He was still lying on the floor.

I was thinking, getting things in order, when Bryans' deep voice cut in on me.

"All right, Joe," he said, "they're all here. Let's get on with it."

"Here we go," I said.

I turned and looked at Gwen and Lawrence and Del Rey. They were all staring at me, all scared as hell. In a few minutes, I thought, one of them will be a lot more scared.

"When I first started thinking about this thing," I said, "when I first tried to pick a few possibilities out of the hundreds of people who ate with me in the commissary, I singled out four good prospects. Gwen, because Liz was always beating her out of parts! Rennie, because he was always trying to make Liz and never could. Lawrence, because she was always frustrating him by turning down his lousy ideas; and Del Rey for the same reason as Rennick.

"Well, I was right about it being one of them. But not for any of the reasons I had figured out. . . ."

"Get on with it, Joe," Bryans said.

"Easy, Bryans," I told him. "I want this thing wrapped up completely so it'll stick. . . . Anyhow, I did the thing any copper does when he's mixed up—I started to nose around generally. And I came upon two things which seemed to me to connect up just right. Two things—Gwen was going around with Dickie Lawrence, and Lawrence was a practical joker."

Bryans said, "What the hell—"

"Let me tell it," I said. "A little while ago I told you that almost everybody was sometime a boy friend of Gwen's. Let me correct that . . . anybody who looked pretty good or who had lots of dough, because Gwen spends dough so fast she's always broke no matter how much she makes. But Lawrence is a runty little punk and he doesn't make much dough. How does that figure?"

I answered myself. "I'll tell you

how it figures. It figures that Lawrence was getting dough from some place outside his job, and Gwen was laughing at him but stringing along because she loves dough." I looked at Gwen. "Maybe you figured he was borrowing dough until he was up to his ears in debt, or maybe you just didn't give a damn where he got it as long as he had it. But he was always flashing plenty of moo, right?"

Her face was pasty. She pointed to a ruby bracelet and a diamond ring on her finger. You could sneer at the diamond—it wasn't even as big as an apple. "He gave me these. And—and other things."

LAURENCE was starting to get to his feet, and I yanked out my gun and pointed it at him. "Easy, pal. There's nothing I'd like better than to start shooting."

He sat down again.

I said, "Ruby bracelets and diamonds like baseballs and other things on a salary of maybe three-four hundred a week. Nice stuff. I figure his other income began because he's a practical joker. You know the way it is with practical jokers—they leave stink bombs here and artificial mice there, and you get so used through the years to seeing them sneaking in and out of places playing practical jokes that you hardly give it a second thought.

"That's the way it must have happened. Lawrence must have sneaked into Rennick's office to pull some kind of gag — maybe in one of Rennick's desk drawers—and then stopped dead because he had come upon something incriminating to Rennick. What was it, Lawrence? Rennick been playing the market with company dough?"

Lawrence's mouth opened and spittle like miniature bubbles formed on his lips. His eyes were slow poison but his mouth was wrapped in silence.

"You can find out easily enough," I told Bryans. "Anyhow, this was Lawrence's chance to get friendly

with the big-shot babe he'd been ogling for a long time, so he collared the thing and began to bleed Rennick for everything he had. And there it was."

Bryans said, "Then why the murders?"

"Use your head, Bryans," I said wearily. "Liz found out about it somehow. I'll take a stab at the how. This Lawrence punk is so dumb he might even have mislaid the evidence against Rennick, and maybe it turned up in a bunch of publicity sheets he gave Liz. It didn't take Liz long to figure out what was going on."

It was difficult to talk right after that, thinking of sweet little Liz dying so a runty blackmailer could continue his romance with a no-good dame like Gwen. But I had to wrap it up for Bryans so I went on:

"So Liz called Dick Lawrence in and accused him of it, and he must have threatened her and run out of the place ranting and screaming. Liz sat down to think it over and then she called me—and that was when he overheard it and slowed me up and killed her.

"That slowing up, by the way, was my first clue to the fact that the killer was Lawrence. When I tried to figure out who had had the opportunity to dope my coffee, I couldn't get to first base because it could have been almost anybody. But that was why I was up the wrong tree. Instead of worrying about who had the opportunity to drop the stuff in my coffee, I should have been wondering who would just happen to have the stuff on the spot to drop.

"The funny-boy practical joker, of course. He must have gotten hold of the stuff somewhere and been thinking how funny it would be to watch people drop off to sleep right in the commissary. And then he suddenly had a more urgent use for the stuff."

"And the Rennick knock-off?" Bryans asked.

I HELD up my hand. "It follows right along," I said. "When I was sitting outside Rennick's office waiting to get in to him, I heard him arguing with someone. That someone, I realize now, was Lawrence; and Rennick must have figured out the reason for Liz's death and was getting scared about it and tough to handle. Finally Rennick must have cooled down, but Lawrence still felt uneasy about it, so instead of going away he hung around outside the door of the private exit, waiting and thinking. And he heard Rennick right on the verge of spilling the whole story to me.

"He had Rennick's own gun with him—he'd probably swiped it when he stole the evidence that day, because now he was a blackmailer and he wanted to feel tough with a gun and all. And he saw a chance—a chance to 'solve' Liz's murder for the police and shut up Rennick at the same time. He was really in the blackmailing business now, anyway—in his room I found a picture of Del Rey and some gal who probably has a tough husband—so he wasn't too worried about the loss of income from Rennick.

"He waited until I went into the ante-room, then he came back and held the gun on Rennick while he locked the door. Then he shot Rennick, framed up a quick suicide—and made the mistake of putting the gun in the wrong hand at the same time—and beat it."

Lawrence was squirming in his chair, looking sick and beaten. I looked at him with contempt. "You weren't even a smart criminal," I said. "You planted red herrings at Gwen's place and Del Rey's, and you framed Rennick with the gun you used on Liz, but you didn't even have the sense to plant a frame in your own place. Those things were so obviously frames—why in hell else would a killer carry away useless stuff like an empty envelope and a locket?—that they pointed right

toward the one guy who was too innocent.

"You might as well take him away, Bryans. And if I know this master criminal here, you'll probably even find the Rennick evidence in his pocket."

I even had him there—I could tell by the look on his face. And then, as I watched him, he grew silent and still.

Too silent. Too still. The look of a guy who is about to try to make a break for it.

You understand that this was the guy who had killed Liz, my Liz. You understand. You would have done the same thing in my place. I let the gun droop carelessly, and I turned my head away toward Bryans.

And then Lawrence was on his feet, his breath gasping, and he was clawing inside his coat pocket. I'd noticed the bulge when he walked in. Another rod.

I turned my head back, casually, but I couldn't do it. I let him have it in the arm instead of the belly. I wanted him to suffer but I wasn't able to go through with it. Maybe it was better this way, anyway. The Law would collect in full.

But not really in full, one way you look at it. Murder is too final. Dick Lawrence would pay, but no matter how much, it wouldn't bring Liz back.

That was the thought that kept burning in me as I stumbled out of there. Before, I was too busy doing what I had to do—the soldier who hasn't time to think. But now thinking of her was what I had time for—thinking of her and missing her.

I didn't hear Bryans' call, I didn't hear the other words flung at me. I went out and it was warm in the waning sun and it's strange but somehow I felt after a little while that Liz was walking there in the sundown beside me.

He was . . .



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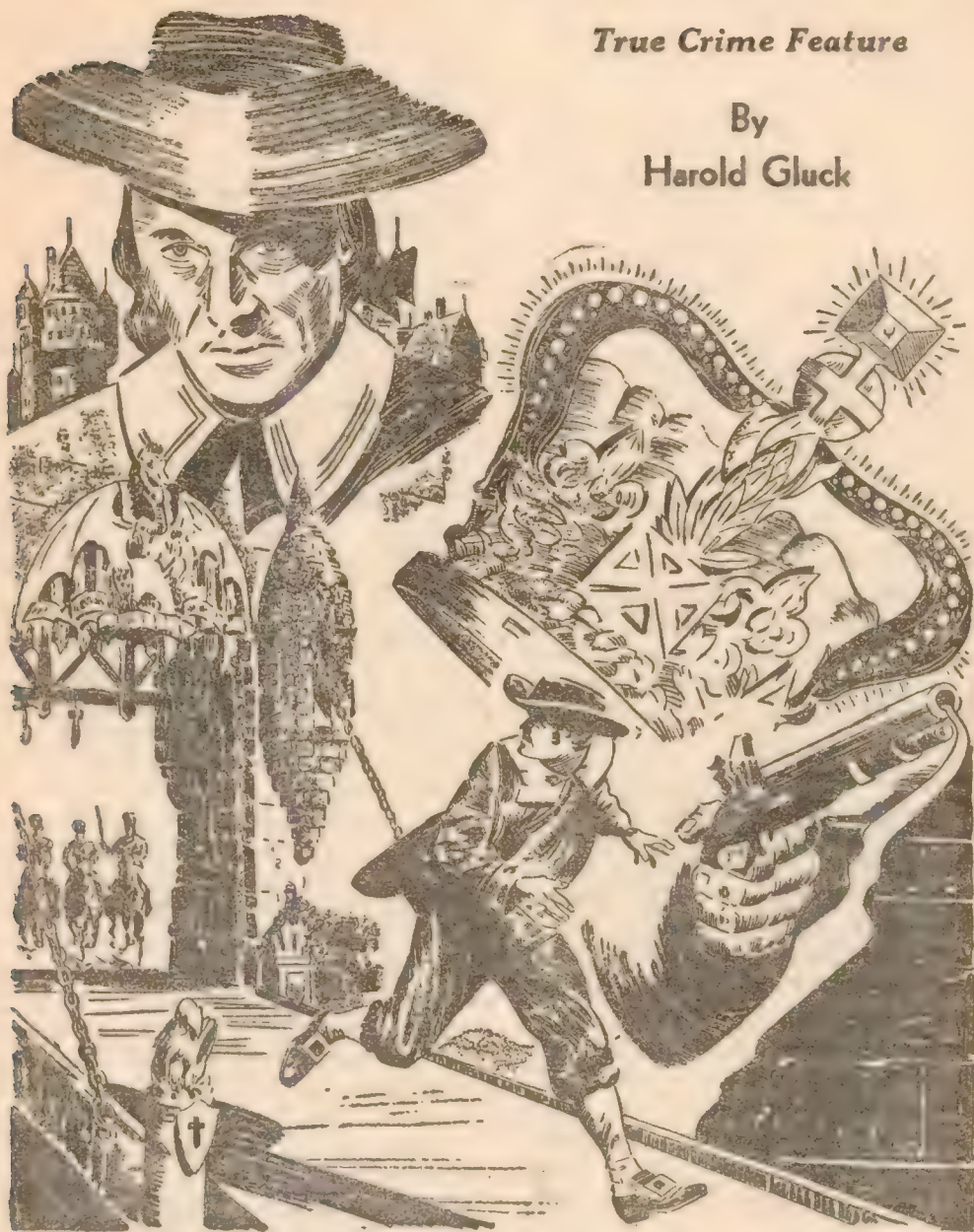
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He Stole a Crown

True Crime Feature

By
Harold Gluck



*With a price on his head,
the notorious Thomas
Blood stole the greatest
headpiece in the world—
the Royal Crown.*

THE trouble with Captain Thomas Blood was that he was born just three centuries ahead of his time. In this day and age, Hollywood would have been clamoring for him to act major roles in Budget A pictures, for he was a handsome and

dashing figure. And on the radio he probably would have thrilled unseen millions with descriptions of his adventures in crime.

After all, a man who stole the Royal Crown from the Tower of London, and lived to tell his story, can be considered as having reached the apex in criminal daring and enterprise.

The records show that in a little place called Sarney, in County Meath, Ireland, there was a man by the name of Blood, living a rather contented life in the first quarter of the seventeenth century. By trade he was a blacksmith and ironworker, and he owned property, including an ironworks. However, he was not a native Irishman; he was one of the group sent into Ireland by the English Government as part of their policy to "colonize" the land.

In 1628 a son was born to him who was christened with the not uncommon name of Thomas. He was born in an era when Parliament and the King struggled, and people took sides in the dispute.

When civil war broke out, the Blood family seems to have been in the thick of it. Prince Rupert wrote many years later that he remembered a young man who was bold and dashing, and a fierce soldier. He was referring to young Blood. Hence, it looks as though Blood was on the side of the Royalists.

However, the next time we find him fighting, he is on the side of the opposition, being a lieutenant in Cromwell's army. In the interim he found time to fall in love with a Miss Holcroft, the daughter of a man of good character in Lancashire. They were married and he returned to Ireland.

With fighting in Scotland and Ireland keeping Cromwell busy, Blood probably saw lots of blood on the battlefield. After the "rebels" had been crushed, he was properly rewarded. He was given large estates and made Justice of the Peace under Henry Cromwell, son of the dictator.

To keep the records straight, the

estates given to Blood were confiscated from the opposition. During the next seven years, Blood lived like a gentleman, little dreaming he was going to be the greatest criminal adventurer of his time in England.

Then on September 3, 1658, Oliver Cromwell died. New national troubles began; and two years later Charles II rode into London to take the throne. Of course, many people again switched sides, for it always paid to be on the winning side.

Thomas Blood was at first willing to continue to live the life of a gentleman. Unfortunately, the Court of Claims deprived him and others of their property. Now he was ready for trouble, in however big doses it came. He and his brother-in-law entered into a plot to seize Dublin Castle and capture the Duke of Ormond, who was Lord Lieutenant.

A RMS were collected, a plan was worked out, and the day set for the great event. Some of the conspirators were to disguise themselves as workmen and loiter around the great gate of Dublin Castle. One conspirator, to be disguised as a baker, was going to carry loaves of bread. The plan was for him to stumble and spread the bread upon the ground. It was figured that the careless guard would rush for the food, the baker would start a fight, and while this distracting disturbance was taking place, the "workmen" would rush the gate, overpower the guards, and seize needed arms.

Then the castle was to be taken, the signal given for a countrywide uprising, and the English troops and officials killed. Blood certainly had a good movie scenario in that idea, but there was one trouble with it. Too many people knew about it, and a stool pigeon betrayed the plans.

Blood's brother-in-law was among those arrested. He was executed and his body returned as a gift to the bereaved widow. But Blood escaped, with a price upon his head. What was

left of his estates was confiscated, and he was declared an outlaw.

So officially Thomas Blood was now a criminal, a hunted man with a price upon his head. Somehow he had managed to learn the use of disguises, and it was difficult for the authorities to find a man who could become when necessary a Quaker, a Dissenting minister, and even a Catholic priest.

Finally, Blood went to Holland and met similar refugees from England's national wars. According to his own story, he was introduced to one of England's greatest enemies, Admiral De Ruyter. The old sea dog is reputed to have told Blood to go back and start as much trouble as possible. Meanwhile, the Dutch Fleet paid England a visit and sailed up the Medway and Thames. And Blood was busily engaged stirring up trouble.

Miraculous escapes, one after another, took place for Blood. In fact, there seems to be evidence that he was actually helping the Royalists, playing a double game. He was present in Scotland in an uprising that was crushed, but again he escaped.

We now find him engaged in an enterprise that made his name a household item in England—an adventure that augured the daring he was to employ later in his theft of the Royal Crown. His dear friend, Captain John Mason, and a certain Mr. Leving, had been arrested by the English and turned over to Corporal Darcy to deliver them to jail.

Darcy, with some eight soldiers to accompany him, took his two prisoners to the destination by coach. After four days of traveling, a barber named Scott joined the party. In those days it was much safer to travel the highways of England in a group, especially when the members were soldiers.

And then, out of nowhere, came the rattle of horses' hoofs and the rescue was on in full force. Shots were exchanged, and Corporal Darcy found himself fighting in hand combat with Blood. When the attack was over, sev-

eral soldiers had been wounded, the innocent barber killed, Darcy himself wounded, and Mason rescued.

But a most peculiar incident took place during the affair. Mr. Leving refused to be rescued! For he was apparently a double double-crosser, playing both sides, the government and its enemies. Blood wanted to rescue him and give him the works, for Leving had informed on Blood and his friends in Ireland. Leving was taken to jail and several weeks later he was found dead in his cell. Murder or suicide? To this day no one knows.

But all England now knew of Blood, and knew that he was absolutely unafraid of anything or of anyone. He, Mason, and others were proclaimed outlaws and rewards were posted. To show his contempt for all this, Blood seems to have promoted himself to the rank of Major.

IN 1670, Blood remembered that he had once tried to capture the Duke of Ormond and he decided to try it again. The place was better than any a radio writer could devise. For after the capture, Blood intended to string up Ormond in the public execution place and let him hang there like a common criminal.

With several companions, he did make the attack as the Duke was riding in his coach. But Blood overlooked one small detail. The Duke kept regular hours and when the coach failed to return home on time, the porter in charge of the gates went out to see what was wrong. He met a frightened coachman who informed him that several ruffians were dragging his lordship through the streets.

The alarm was spread and the rescuers got there just in time to save a muddy figure wearing the Order of the Garter from a terrible end. Rewards were offered for the capture of these terrible criminals. The House of Lords was scared stiff and appointed a committee to investigate. Finally they discovered the terrible truth; it was Major Blood, lately promoted, who

was in back of the outrage on his lordship. Blood was again proclaimed an outlaw.

And then Blood dreamed his nightmare of nightmares, the scenario that even Hollywood wouldn't dare film. He was going to steal the Royal Crown right out of the Tower of London!

We now must pay a visit to the Tower of London and meet an old soldier by the name of Edwards, his wife, and their daughter. There was a son, Young Edwards, but he was away fighting in the army. The time is shortly after the attack on the Duke of Ormond.

Major Blood disguised himself as a clergyman, and with a woman he called his wife and a young man he adopted as a "nephew," he appeared at the Tower. Suddenly the supposed Mrs. Blood pretended to become ill. She was taken to the Edwards apartment in the Tower and given refreshments. After resting awhile on the bed, she recovered, and the clergyman was very grateful for the attentions shown to his "wife."

The Edwards family received several presents and a friendship developed. The clergyman and his "nephew" paid them several visits, and soon Blood and Edwards talked about a possible marriage between the nephew and Edward's daughter. Then early one morning, Blood, his dear nephew and two accomplices turned up at the Tower to make the final marriage plans.

Mrs. Edwards was still asleep. And remember, all the while Blood was disguised as a clergyman. To pass the time until Mrs. Edwards awoke and dressed, Blood suggested that they be taken to the room where the Royal Crown was kept. Edwards assented, and they mounted the steps to the room where the crown, the sceptre, and the dove were kept.

As the old man bent over the strong chest in that room, they threw a cloak over him, tapped him none too gently with a heavy mallet on the skull, and started to grab the crown jewels.

Blood found it necessary to flatten the bows of the crown to conceal it.

At this point Blood probably considered his attempt successful. In a few moments he would be out of the Tower with his valuable booty. But unpredicted Fate stepped in to thwart final success. Edward's young son, returning from the wars, came home to see his father. Being informed that his parent was in the jewel room, he entered. The old man had recovered from the tap on the head and was screaming at the top of his lungs. Edward's daughter heard the cry and joined in the commotion.

YOUNG EDWARDS had with him a companion, Captain Beckman, and both soldiers fired shots. Blood and his group made a dash for the drawbridge. Blood fired at the warden, who fell to the ground unhurt, but remained there for safety's sake. Captain Beckman caught up with Blood, who fired at him and missed. Then a hand-to-hand fight took place. And the impossible finally happened. Blood was captured.

He is supposed to have said, "It was a gallant attempt, how unsuccessful soever; for it was for a crown!"

Into a cell went Blood, and he refused to talk when asked to name the people behind his attempt to steal the crown. Now it looked as though Blood would have to pay with his life for this and his other crimes. But then the strangest of all mysteries took place. The king sent for Blood—and their interview has continued to baffle students of criminology and history. For Blood was given a full pardon, set at liberty, and given a pension!

I know this doesn't make sense, so try to figure out the reason. Maybe the king was charmed to meet a man who enjoyed living a life full of dangers. Or maybe the king was a practical man. He might have made a deal with Blood to give him full protection against the enemies of the throne. Or maybe Blood was really a secret serv-

(Continued on page 74)



EVERY once in a while real detectives, and even me and Hambone Noonan, run into assassinations that are even nuttier than the ones citizens are forced to listen to on the radio. Take the rubout of Wilberforce T. Bowditch, for instance. Me and Noonan had to. The cops get the word around nine A.M. one day that there is a corpse down in Greenwich Village which never got there through natural causes any more than had a salted gold mine.

The homicidal experts are masterminding when me and Hambone arrive. The late Mr. Bowditch is reposing in a very musty but swank apartment in one of those three-story pue-blos having plenty of iron grillework, and all around him are very odd pieces of furniture and bric-a-brac.

"He looks older than Bowling Green," Noonan says as we get our first gander at the deceased. "He has been shot right through the ticker, Alvin."

"Find anything to go on?" I ask a cop moseying around.

"Give me time, Knucklehead," comes the testy reply. "This ain't a radio scripture. We sent for another old coot who was his only pal and who played chess with him. Lives about two blocks from here. Bowditch

Where There's a Will, There's a Wake

By

Joe Archibald

"Alvin Hinkey" Yarn

Alvin Hinkey, Gotham gumshoe extraordinary, had to play murder's medicine man to learn the secret of the crusty old corpse. For all clues pointed to a voodoo kill—and the Indian sign was on the detective as well as the defunct.

was a retired curio collector and left about two million clams."

The cadaver appraiser figures that Bowditch was removed from the tax rolls nearly twelve hours ago as rigor mortis is as complete as last summer's box scores.

"It looks elemental from here," Noonan says. "Seeing how old he was means he wasn't shot by no jealous suitor. The motive is greed on the part of whoever he was going to leave his scratch to. You wait and see."

"The bullet was a thirty-eight caliber," the medical brain opines, snapping his bag of tools shut.

I take a gander at things around me. I grab at the nearest cop when a stuffed alligator bares its teeth at me. Right above it is a curved shiv with a carved ivory handle.

THE fingerprint boys are beginning to dust around when the little old snook is led in by a cop. He is five-by-five and has a little beard and peers at us through cheaters that makes his eyes look as big as pool balls. His name is Quimby Shupp.

"Awright," Hambone says to the little old character. "When did you see the remains last?"

"Why, I played chess with poor Wilberforce only yesterday afternoon," Shupp says, wringing his bony hands. "Oh, did you look for the doll?"

I jump off a chair that Queen Isabella must've squirmed on while Columbus was in mid-Atlantic. "What?"

"Come now, Shupp," Hambone sniffs. "Leave us be sensible. But you never know, ha, ha! Was this doll blond or brunette?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," the old-timer exclaims. "The voodoo doll. It must be around here somewhere."

We comb the joint and finally find it. It is in an old cardboard box on a shelf next to a dried human head. Hambone lifts it out gingerly and deposits same on a table.

"Wilberforce received it only two days ago," Shupp says. "You will ob-

serve that its features are quite similar to those of the, er—corpse. I must sit down for a moment, gentlemen. Is there spirits about?" Shupp whips out a hanky and mops his brow.

"What's the gimmick?" Noonan asks.

"Gimmick?" Shupp gulps. "This is not very funny, my friends, even though Wilberforce unfortunately laughed it off. Look closer and you will see that a bullet has gone through the doll's heart. . . . Oh, that letter must be in the box."

Old Quimby Shupp is right. The printed words on the old piece of paper are quite ragged as though they'd been made by a citizen with the shaking palsy. I read it aloud to the cops:

"The enemy of the sacred snake must die. Obeah! Obeah! He does not escape the curse of the mamaloi."

Noonan scratches his noggin. "It is Greek to me," he sniffs.

"Wrong," Shupp says. "It is West Indies. My old friend traveled extensively about the world collecting his rare treasures and it seems he must have—er—appropriated one without the necessary legal transaction. There are such things as witchcraft, you know."

"Some punk who has seen too many B pictures is dragging a red heron across our path," Hambone says. "But he won't get away with this hoodoo stuff. Shupp, where was you about twelve hours ago, if I may ask?"

"I—er—let's see now. Of course. I was attending a lecture at Town Hall from eight to eleven. The subject was the Inevitable Effect of Radioactivity on the Formicidic World. All about ants. After that I had spaghetti and did not reach home—"

"Look, Hambone," I says. "Let us inquire about the late Bowditch's last of kin."

"He has two nephews," Shupp answers fast. "Tyrone and Dilbert Soose. Dilbert is his favorite, I am

quite sure. Don't tell me that you suspect them?"

"Everybody here is guilty unless proved innocent," Noonan yelps. "Okay, let the dead wagon have him."

I get the shivers as I appraise the doll. It has been made of old odds and ends, and the noggin was fashioned out of an almost round dry gourd. Old brush bristles were used for the hair and the doll's features have been put on with wax, the kind burlesque comics and undertakers use. It is exhibit A.

AFTER the deep-freeze lorry takes the cadaver away, Hambone Noonan goes into action. "Let's grab the Sooses, Alvin! They'd better have airtight alibis is all I got to say."

"Oh, this is terrible," Shupp suddenly says, and I pivot and see the old coot with a tabloid newspaper. "Who left this here? Wilberforce detested these yellow journals. Tsk, tsk. And turned to the racing page, too."

"Huh?" Noonan grunts.

"Poor Bowditch had a phobia when it came to cheap literature of any kind," Shupp reveals. "If anyone as much as mentioned horse racing in his presence he would go into a most violent rage. You see, his father and grandfather before him were ruined by wagering large sums on such animals."

"They had bookies in the time of King Solomon?" I yelp. "This is the silliest case I ever— Who brought a tabloid with 'em, anyhow?"

"It is of yesterday's date," Shupp says. "It would seem to me that Wilberforce had a visitor before he was shot."

"I'll do the detectin' here," Hambone pouts, and grabs the tabloid out of Shupp's hand. "Hm, a cross word puzzle all done with the exception of one word down and across, Alvin. Here is the major clue. Let's see what it was that stuck him. Er—forty-one down—a five-letter word meanin' finished. That's simple enough which

shows the killer is no Harvards graduate. Dead is the word."

"Not unless it is spelled with two 'd's' on the end," I sigh. "Well, both you and the guilty party start out from scratch, Hambone. We could do better quizzing the Soose boys, don't you think?"

We look them up in the telephone book. We call on Tyrone first and discover that he displays no more criminal tendencies than a week-old rabbit. He is employed by a firm specializing in butterfly wing and sea shell costume jewelry and he wears a perfect attendance Sunday School pin.

"They say you are the favorite heir," Hambone snaps at Tyrone. "That meant two million clams if your uncle got shoved off the dock. Where was you all last night during the murder?"

"Oh my," Tyrone says. "Did it take all night?"

"You should be a writer for Bob Hope," I laugh.

"Please, Alvin," Noonan admonishes. "This is no time for levitation. Awright, Soose, I'm waitin' for the alibi."

"Why, I took a long walk through Van Cortland Park as I had a very difficult problem to figure out. Maybe you could help me. Would you put a yellow butterfly wing under blue glass or green glass?"

Noonan paws savagely at his pan. "Anybody see you?"

"Well, I wouldn't know," Soose says. "It was raining quite hard and I had my slicker pulled up around my head. Are you insinuating, by the way, that I murdered my uncle?"

"He catches on easy, Alvin," Hambone sneers. "Like bread crumbs to a magnet. Oh, we're wastin' our time here. Let's hunt up Dilbert."

"If I was doing this I'd look about for a character with a dark epidermis and carrying a rooster to the sacrifice," I says. "Somebody that keeps chickens—I once heard voodoo citizens drink rooster blood."

"We'll try that if all other leads git

us nowheres, Alvin," Hambone says tolerantly.

We take a rattler downtown and arrive at the office of Dilbert Soose inside half an hour. Dilbert's frosted glass door says *Clipping Service*, and Hambone says he never knew citizens were so barefaced about it. It is quite evident that this Soose is not too prosperous. His office could stand a paint job and the stuffing is peeking out of the furniture. But he is no more like his brother, Tyrone, than a pearl is like a starfish, as he is a very attractive and athletic male who wears clothes almost as good as window dummies.

"I assume you fellows are detectives," Dilbert says quite insolently. "I would never have guessed if my brother had not called me a few moments ago."

"We will let that one go by for the nonce," I sneer, and get a glimpse of a picture of a very gorgeous blonde which reposes on the character's desk. She does not remind me of love in a cold-water flat or a country cottage.

Hambone takes over. "Now, Soose, you can save yourself and us time. Where was you between the hours of nine o'clock last night?"

"Huh?" Dilbert Soose asks, quite puzzled.

"He means that your uncle was knocked off sometime around that hour," I elucidate.

"I was calling on a lady and left not before ten, I'm pretty sure," Soose says defiantly.

"Pretty ain't sure enough," Noonan says tartly. "Would the doll corrugate your story, you think?" Then he leans forward and grabs up a newspaper. "Ha! He was doin' another tabloid puzzle in today's paper, Alvin. Yeah, it's the same lettering! You ever find what that five-letter word meaning finished was, Soose?"

"Why, how did you know?"

"Just that you left yesterday's tabloid, *The Evening Ledger*, right near your poor murdered uncle, that's

all," Hambone snaps. "So that proves you called on him."

"Er—sure," Dilbert Soose admitted. "Around five P.M. Are you accusin' me of murder?"

"I got to hang it on somebody, pal," Noonan yelps. "Right now you look like the baby! You'd better grab your hat and accompany us to the D.A. And while we're about it, Alvin, we will pick up that blonde on the way. Where can we find her, Soose?"

"This is an outrage!" Soose protests shrilly.

"Maybe only a dame could dress up a voodoo doll and get its camisole on right," Hambone says. "Come on, pal, as don't make me get rough."

WE STOP in at an apartment on West Twelfth Street and find the blonde in a pull-over and slacks and they do very nice by her. She is quite rude to the law, though. She calls Soose by the name of Dil and asks where he picked up the characters.

"They are from the D.A.'s office, Baby," Dilbert says. "My uncle was murdered last night and they want an alibi."

The blonde's sultry eyes put up their dukes. She looks at the boy friend askance. "If you got into a jam, sonny boy," she says, "count this gal out!"

"All that you got to do is answer a couple of questions from the D.A., Vinona," Soose says. "I never shot anybody."

"Okay, I'll go fix up my face first. Wait here," the doll says.

"Her name is Vinona DeVal," Soose divulges as we wait. "She sings the radio commercials for Wembly's Soap."

We wait for an hour. Hambone squirms and snaps, "She must be two-faced, Alvin. It wouldn't take so long to fix up one kisser. You think she lammed?"

"Don't go talking about her like she was a moll!" Soose objects, and then out comes Vinona and she is the

most expensive number in nylons I ever hope to see. The mink coat she's wearing must have set some patsy back at least five grand. I have to poke Noonan to get him out of a trance.

We arrive at the D.A.'s office and who do we get introduced to but the late Wilberforce Bowditch's lawyer, one Clarence Barrow.

"All right, we'll have a nice little chat, shall we?" the prosecutor says. "All right, Noonan, what have you got?"

"This is the Soose that left the discriminating tabloid in the apartment with the deceased, D.A.," Noonan says. "He admits he was there around five or six P.M. He says he was with this babe—er—lady around nine. Ask her to vilify that statement."

"How about it, Miss DeVal?" the D.A. asks.

"Look, I stopped watchin' clocks when I quit at Racey's Basement," the doll says, and it does not appear to me that she is all out for Dilbert. "It could of been eight, nine, or ten he left. Look, I got a career to consider an' I'm gettin' mixed up in no murders."

"How far would you say it was from your apartment to where the crime was committed, Miss DeVal?"

"Where was it committed? I'm not a mind reader."

"Ahem. On Eighth Street," the D.A. says.

"Then it was four blocks or more, that's all," the mouse in the mink says.

Hambone snaps his fingers. "He could of run over and knocked the old gink off in less'n twenty minutes, D.A. That hoodoo doll was somethin' he used to cover up the real motive. Let's book him!"

"I'm tellin' all I know!" Vinona yips. "I'm gettin' in the clear for good an' all. Sure, Soose has been askin' me to marry him for over a year now, but there's two other guys who've got what little Vinona needs to be made very happy. Right in

their mitts right now. I'm talkin' about the old do-re-mi! This guy is full of promises. Give me a year at the most, sweetheart, an' I'll have enough dough to give you a limousine upholstered in chinchillas. Sure, he was waiting for an old coot to pass out. He—"

Dilbert lifts a hand in protest. He is sweating very copiously. "Vinona, you realize what you're saying?"

"I sure do. I've never touched a reefer, Dilbert," the babe says. "It looks too much like you rubbed the old rooster out to suit me. I am coverin', darlin'."

THERE is a choking sound from Clarence, the late Bowditch's mouthpiece, and I look at him quick. He starts to say something but then clams up.

"So you can't get the time right, huh?" Noonan says to Soose. "D.A., we'd better hold him. There's the motive sittin' there in the mink coat."

"And he owes a bookie four grand," Vinona says, putting Soose deeper in the old satchel. "Bookies hate to wait a year or three. Well, if that is all you want from me . . ."

"It is plenty," Noonan says. "Even if I hate criminals, I never like to see one get his throat cut so inclusive. I bet you have fun up in the snake house at the zoo chucking cobras under the chin."

"If I wasn't a lady I'd belt you right in your silly puss!" Vinona snaps, and makes her exit.

"We'll finish him off in the grill room tomorrer, D.A.," Hambone says. "Before he gets a mouthpiece to make out a habus corpus. No wonder Tyrone was the old victim's favorite."

It is later in the day that the D.A. calls us into his office. "I don't figure this case is as easy as it looks, men," he says. "According to the records, we investigated a break at Wilberforce Bowditch's place about six months ago. The wall safe there was forced open but not a thing was stolen. And Soose's lawyer says he

just got back from out of town an hour before he came here. His secretary gave him a message that the old guy called him up and wanted to see him as soon as he got back. That call came about three days ago. Barrow says Bowditch never got in touch with him unless it was something mighty important."

"Maybe he was scairt and ast for a bodyguard," Hambone says. "Oh, we got the guilty one awright. Dilbert Soose was in deep with a bang-tail broker and had to pay up soon or get his own rubout investigated. I'll sweat the whole works out of that punk inside twenty-four hours, D.A."

I see the voodoo doll on the desk and pick it up. The boss lets out a squawk and says not to poke at it. "There might be a deadly native poison in it somewheres, Hinkey! Loaded in a needle or something, Why, you—er—look sick already!"

"I—I do?" I choke out. "Maybe because I—well, maybe because I am tender-hearted a times and shudder at the thought of an innocent party gettin' fried, D.A."

"Now just what do you mean by that, Alvin Hinkey?" Noonan snaps.

"It is you being so positive, Hambone," I reply. "I am always tempted to take the negative and see what I can develop from it as generally when I do the picture is so different than yours."

"There are times when I do not think Hinkey's symphonies are always with the law," Noonan sniffs. "I've gone along as far as I figure to trying to make him a good detective, D.A. I don't think he's got what it takes."

"You want to bet, nature boy?" I says sharply.

"All right," the boss says. "Both of you get lost!"

Me and Hambone go separate ways and I hie to a cigar store and call Dilbert Soose's office. I get the old frump there on the phone and ask for her employer's home address. She tells me it is on West Sixty-

eighth Street, so I head for the subway.

The address is an apartment house of modest aspect. I go to the basement door and lean against the bell. A corpulent citizen responds to the racket and admits he is the superintendent.

"I am from the detective bureau," I says, showing him my metal. "There is a character we are investigating named Soose and I must get into his apartment. I am sure you wish to co-operate with the law."

"Soose? Yeah, I always thought there was something fishy about him," the character says. "Let's go up to 3H. Come right in. I'll git the keys."

WE GO up to the third floor and into Soose's snug little layout. I look at another picture of the blond babe and get the shivers, then go to a dresser and pull out a drawer and examine the clean duds. Right away I am quite convinced.

"You got anythin' on him?" the super asks.

"Soose is guilty all right," I exclaim.

"Soon as I read of the murder I knew it," the super says flatly.

"How did you know Bowditch was his uncle? The papers never mentioned his heirs until—"

"Soose owes six months back rent. He told me he most likely would get a big chunk of dough when the old guy passed out."

"Hm," I says. "How could he be so sure? I think I know, though. Well, thanks for the team work, pal."

"It's a pleasure," the superintendent says, and grins. Then his pan straightens out. "What am I saying? How will I get that dough he owes if the chair gets him?"

"I wouldn't know," I says.

The next thing I do is go out to Broadway and give up another nickel to the telephone company and have them buzz The Niblett Novelty Jewelry Company.

"Let me speak to Mr. Tyrone

Soose," I says when a switchboard cookie responds.

She lets me. And then a voice says, "Soose speaking."

"I am Mr. Alvin Hinkey from police headquarters, Mr. Soose," I says. "No doubt you know that your brother is being held as a suspect. Yes, it is distressing. Seems to be no doubt about it. We would just like a few small details regarding his character and such that might help him escape the supreme penalty. If I could drop in and see you around seven this evening. . . . That's fine, Mr. Soose. What is the address?"

It is a rooming house on West Twenty-third Street. I jot it down and then leave the booth, telling myself it is quite odd that oftentimes brothers are no more like each other than are grapefruit and bananas.

I go to a beanery and stoke up and drive the butterflies out of my stomach. The late papers are out and into the beanery comes an ex-pug with bells in his ears who is vending the journals. I purchase one and a headline says:

POLICE HOLD SUSPECT
IN VODOO SLAYING

The fine print mentions fast detective work on the part of Noonan and right away my hamburger loses what taste it had. I can think of a better headline and figure I'll give it to a city editor. *Murder Comes Out in the Wash*. While I kill another half hour over a second beer, I think of a song title also. *Voodoo Something to Me!* I also take time out to feel sorry for Hambone.

At six fifty-five I am admitted to a rooming house in the old Chelsea district by a buxom babe with a purple rinse and wearing a slack suit that really isn't. I ask for Tyrone Soose and she says he hives up on the third floor back.

I GO upstairs and rap for admittance and right away Tyrone lets me in. It is a room that would be

considered even too cramped by the head of a society investigating cruelty to convicts; its one little window faces a blank brick wall. Tyrone has it tastefully slicked up, however. On the wall is a big square of butterflies under glass and on his dresser is a picture of his late uncle, Wilberforce Bowditch.

"I just can't believe it," Tyrone says in a church elder's voice. "Even though Dilbert never lived—shall we say, a model life?"

"I can't either, Mr. Soose," I reply, and reach into my pocket. I bring out a little white piece of cloth and place it in the palm of my right hand and hold it out toward Tyrone. "It came off the voodoo doll somebody left at your uncle's door, Mr. Soose. It is what laundries stitch onto socks after they're washed so as not to get them mixed up with the socks of other customers.

"I have looked at Dilbert's clean socks and they carry a different kind of tag. The citizen who dressed up the doll used odds and ends from his wardrobe. I knew it was a male since no remnants of dainty undies was used at all, and what babe wouldn't use same if she was dressing up a doll?"

Tyrone's ears twitch. He gets up from the bed and his eyes would no longer look in place on a rabbit. "What are you insinuating, Hinkey?" he says in a flat tone.

"You shouldn't take so much for granted, pal," I says. "All this time you were so sure you was the heir to two million clams because everybody thought so. The thing I had a time figuring out was why your brother, Dilbert—being such a playboy and a hayburner addict—was just as confident he was due to get the bulk of the estate. He wouldn't have run into so much debt if he hadn't been."

"It's impossible, Hinkey!" Soose sniffs. "He had no right to expect any inheritance. My uncle wouldn't—"

"Heirs have been surprised before," I interrupts. "I'll tell you why Dilbert was sure. Six months ago the wall safe in your uncle's apartment was forced open but nothing was snitched. I would say Dilbert did that to get a gander at the late Mr. Bowditch's copy of his will. He saw what he wanted. I would like to bet he is the white-haired citizen when the will is read.

"You got tired of waiting, Tyrone, and figured a way to rub the old coot out. Only your nimble hands and artistic talent could have made that voodoo doll. You probably also had visions of a swell apartment and a gorgeous doll, Tyrone. You was living out of character as long as you could stand it. Now, I'll take a look at the socks you got back from the laundry the last wash."

It looks like Tyrone was something of a magician also as he suddenly has a Betsy in his hand and I am very sure that it did not come with a box-top advertising the breakfast of champs.

"You are much too smart for one who looks so dumb!" Tyrone says in a Peter Lorre voice. "It is logic that they couldn't do any more to me for two murders than one."

I am staring Mr. Bones right in the old skull and I urge myself to talk fast. "Sure, Soose," I yelp. "You could rub me out and how far away would you get, huh? For days upon days you would be a hunted creature if you knock me off and lam. Where is there another furnished room to lay your weary noggin? Everytime somebody touched you on the shoulder you would jump out of your boxer shorts. You would only come out of the hole you was hiding in under cover of dark and sneak like a rat to the garbage cans to get a crust of bread. You would maybe freeze to death in some used car lot. You would know no human companionship unless—"

"Stop!" Tyrone gulps while globules of worry dew appear on his pan.

I am sure he is about to drop the Betsy when he suddenly aims it at my midriff and howls, "You nearly got me, Hinkey! It's better to live on crusts of bread than bake like a loaf of one up the river. Take that, you flatfoot!"

Tyrone fires. It is like getting smacked in the solar plexus by a John L. or a Joe Louis. I double up like a scout knife and hit the floor. I can't breathe. Alvin, I says to myself, this is it! You'll get the finish in a second. Good-by, Hambone.

SOMEBODY bangs on Tyrone's door. I hear the slayer breathing heavy like a hound dog after a three-mile chase after a rabbit. Right away I get enough presence of mind to make like a cadaver, and I wonder why I don't give up a death rattle. My hands are still pressed against my bread basket and they aren't sticky. Alvin, you darling of the gods, you. You know why, don't you?

Tyrone opens the door. A roomer asks, "I was certain I heard a shot, Mr. Soose."

"Of course you're mistaken," Soose replies. "A backfire somewhere outside no doubt."

"Excuse me, Mr. Soose, as my nerves have been on edge of late," the voice says, and then the door shuts and a bolt is slid in place. Tyrone heaves a very deep sigh and mutters to himself, "I must get rid of the body somehow. Oh, this is terrible. Ah, I'll hide it under the bed until later."

Tyrone comes over and reaches down to get me over on my back. Just as he does this I bring up a fist and hit him right under the chin.

"A rigor mortis reflex!" I yelp, jumping to my feet.

Tyrone quickly gathers up his marbles, cries out with stark surprise, and lunges. I step nimbly aside and Mr. Soose continues on his lunge straight at the washbowl in the corner. His noggin comes in vio-

lent contact with the plumbing and the sound it makes assures me that Tyrone has been rendered very *hors de combat*.

I glance about quickly and see the butt of his Roscoe protruding out from under the pillow on the bed and I lose no time confiscating same.

I am still quite sore in the mid-section and look down at my belt buckle. It is fashioned out of heavy German silver and was a present from a GI. Lucky for me. The bullet Soose pumped at me did not quite get through metal and leather. I would have been a dead duck, I tells myself, if I had been in the habit of wearing my pants almost at half mast like Noonan. I get the shakes and sit down. I hear a low moan from the assassin and point the Roscoe at him.

"Where are they? There was pretty butterflies flying all about—with honey bees," Tyrone says as he gets to his hands and knees. "There was music in the dell, and birds—where am I?"

"You won't like it where it is," I says. "I suppose this is the Betsy you put the hole in the voodoo doll with, Buster. And into your poor old uncle Wilberforce."

"Why, yes," Tyrone says automatically. Then suddenly he slaps himself sharply in the mouth. He is back from dreamland.

I walk to the dresser and yank out a drawer. Then another. I get a pair of laundered socks and shove them into my pocket.

"Tsk, tsk," I mock the slayer. "All criminals slip up don't they? Leave us begin the journey to the bastille. It is up to you whether you will travel in a horizontal position or vertical."

"I'll go quietly," Tyrone says, like in the movies, and holds out his hands for the jewelry used exclusively by such citizens as myself.

We have to wait an hour or so for the D.A. to arrive after I introduce Tyrone Soose to the cops. I call a cer-

tain gin mill and locate Noonan there and invite him over.

"Well, for once you were half right, Hambone," I says when the knucklehead comes into the D.A.'s office. "You just had the wrong Soose. If you will bring the voodoo doll to light I will show you that it was made from remnants of Tyrone's shirts, undies and socks. He will acquiesce. You see, D.A., I found a laundry mark on the doll when I examined it earlier in the day. I have got it here and I will check it with the ones on some socks I have brought."

"An' I was going to use a rubber hose on the other Soose tomorrer," Hambone says in a strangled voice. "I never saw such luck you fall into, Alvin. You'd get shot in the stummick point-blank an' your belt buckle would save you!"

"What? Are you psychic, Noonan? That is just what happened. Look!"

HAMBONE does and his mouth begins to work like that of a goldfish starving for ozone. I never saw a sillier expression on the D.A.'s pan as long as I've known him.

"Okay, Tyrone," I says. "The shorthand whiz is ready. So tell us a story."

Tyrone sees he can do nothing else so he makes a face and makes with the chatter.

"Well, three or four days ago, I guess it was, I went to call on Uncle Wilberforce. His door was unlocked so I went right in. I hear him in the next room talking on the telephone. He is asking for his lawyer, Clarence Barrow, and he sounds like he is blowing his top. He says for the secretary to have the lawyer call him as soon as he gets back, then hangs up.

"He talked to himself a lot. I hear him say, 'I'll have that will changed so quick it'll make that wastrel's hair curl!' I figure he means me because on the afternoon before, I went to the racetrack with a dame. I saw a

guy who used to work for Uncle Wilberforce and I'm sure he saw me. So I told myself he told my uncle and that must be the reason he wanted the beneficiary changed from me to Dilbert."

"Yeah," I says. "Then you cooked up the voodoo doll idea to make the cops think Bowditch had swindled a West Indian who worshipped a snake or a goat, or had stole a witch doctor's amulet. Finding the doll in a chamber of horrors such as your uncle lived in, the cops—"

"That's right," Tyrone gripes. "I was sick of living like a churchmouse and a Gideon Bible salesman, so the day after I left the doll at his door, I went there and shot him before he could change the will."

"Greed is awful," I observe.

Tyrone signs the confession and is taken away and Dilbert Soose is released and we put the works to him. Dilbert is quite penitent and admits he forced the safe in his uncle's apartment that time. He had to know who was to get the load of clams.

"You, huh?" the D.A. asks.

Dilbert nods. "I sure was surprised when I got a gander at the will. You never know, do you?"

Hambone Noonan sits there gaping at the Exhibits A, B, and C. The voodoo doll, the Roscoe, and the laundry tag. "An' I had a tabloid that was left next to the corpse," he mutters. "I got the motive, the

blonde, and a five-letter word meaning finished. What else does a poor slob need?"

"Look under your hat," I says.

"I found out the word later," Dilbert Soose says. "It was *kaput*!"

"I would say it was really Tyrone," I offer. "Just consider the bazaar situation we have here, boys. Poor Tyrone knocked off the old geezer who was going to change the will to make him the sole heir. There is more irony in that than you'll find in an auto graveyard. The blonde babe sang herself right out of Dilbert's little address book, she was so afraid he was guilty. Now instead of going to the rotisserie, Dilbert will have two million clams to spend and she won't get even a smell of an orchid. It is awful, jumping at conclusions. Hambone, though, jumps through them, which is worse."

"Wonderful detective work, Hinkey," the D.A. compliments me. "You'll go far!"

"I'm goin' only a block away and git plastered!" Hambone yelps petulantly. "I'll stay that way for six months!"

"Voodoo that—er—you do that, Noonan," the D.A. says. "I am sure your work will show a hundred per cent improvement during that time."

"It sure come out in the wash," I says, and follow Noonan out. He looks like something that passed through a wringer.

He Stole a Crown

By Harold Gluck

(Continued from page 64)

ice agent. Blood even managed to get pardons for most of his friends.

For the next ten years Blood lived in and out of the court. It seemed he had something on the Duke of Buckingham, who in turn sued Blood. Our old friend managed to survive this and die in bed.

But as soon as he was buried, a ter-

rible rumor spread: "Blood is fooling everyone. He isn't dead!"

So they opened the grave, and the coroner checked the body. He was satisfied that it was Blood, and they put the corpse back again, this time for a permanent rest. If his ghost is around, the chances are his astral body is looking for adventures.

Satan Flips the Coin

By M. E. Counselman

Morelli was the kind of gambler who had bet on everything. But this was the first time he took long odds on his own life.



AS THOUGH a giant's invisible hand had pushed it, the plate-glass window of the small Florida hotel splintered and fell inward. Wind rushed into the lobby, a gusty howling intruder that snatched papers from the hands of reading

guests and overturned a vase of cat-tails on a table.

The smooth young man in a flashy sport jacket glanced over his shoulder, and whistled. He turned back to the desk once more, grinning at the nervous-eyed clerk.

"Some breeze," he commented lightly, then scowled. "No mail at all for me? You're sure?"

"Positive, Mr. Langtry." The clerk compressed his lips. "I just looked."

"But there must be!" The guest ground his teeth and struck a well-manicured fist on the marble counter. "Look." His keen dark eyes speared the clerk. "The hell with this hurricane! Get me a call through to Hialeah, and I'll slip you a hundred bucks. It may be worth ten grand to me. I—"

"Just a—a racing bet? Mister Langtry!" The man's voice was beginning to stiffen with an overstretch of patience. "I've told you. The wires are loaded between here and Tallahassee. This storm—well, money just isn't very important when there are so many lives at stake. The Red Cross is evacuating everybody in this area who'll go. I'm leaving in fifteen minutes myself—with my family. Believe me, you'd be wise to leave, too, by any—any means that you . . ."

The clerk's voice trailed. His jaw dropped.

A stocky middle-aged man with heavy jowls, tired blue eyes, and a worn serge business suit had stepped up behind Langtry, walking wearily as though he had come a long way on feet that hurt. With a practiced gesture that was imperceptible to anyone else in the flurried, overcrowded lobby, he took a gun from his pocket and shoved it against Langtry's back. Expertly he patted the other man all over, removed a small automatic, then slipped both weapons into his own pockets before anyone noticed.

"All right, Morelli. Let's go." His quiet voice was granite hard but not hostile. "No funny business, now! I'd just as soon let you have it—making me chase you all over hell and half of Florida!"

The man in the bright sports coat had gone suddenly pale. He started to elevate his hands, but let them fall when the other grunted, "Uh-uh. Down." He turned slowly, expelled a

slow breath, and grinned feebly, tense but not unfriendly.

"Donegan." He chuckled and shook his head. "I just don't believe it! Nobody but you would tail a guy for three years—and right into the middle of a hurricane area!"

The plainclothes man grinned back at him wearily. "Didn't bet on that, did you, chum?" He jerked his head toward the elevator. "Come on. Let's pack your ditty bag and get out of here before this wind takes over."

HIS prisoner shrugged, and walked toward the lift as casually as if he accompanied a friend. Art Morelli himself pushed the buzzer, but his black eyes were canny as they stepped into the small, old-fashioned elevator.

"I don't suppose," he drawled *sotto voce*, "that five grand would persuade you to start hunting me again—in another direction?"

"Uh-uh." His captor yawned. "I don't suppose." He leaned against the iron wall easily, wiggling a loose tooth.

Morelli, alias Langtry snorted. "You always were a sucker, Donegan! Why, five grand would finish paying for that little house you and Connie . . ." His face changed expression almost imperceptibly, the black eyes momentarily soft. "By the way, how is Connie? And that cute kid of yours?"

"Lonesome!" the plainclothes man snapped. "Am I glad to be pulling you in at last, so's I can stay home a while! Connie won't be glad, though," he added grudgingly. "She—she had a soft spot for you, Morelli. Says you're not a bad guy. Just weak."

"Weak!" the gambler bridled. "How d'you like that? I give my gal up to a better man," he clowning, "and she thinks it's because I'm weak."

"You never gave up nothing to nobody," the detective drawled. "Connie just chose living with a cop to being chased by 'em! She's always argued, though," he grinned, "that you're not

crooked all the way through—that nobody is. Everybody's got his own point of honor, Connie says."

"Point of—?" Morelli asked.

"Yeah. And maybe she's got something there," Donegan chuckled. "Me, I'd cheat at solitaire, but I'd never sell out the Department. And you?" The plainclothes man squinted at his prisoner. "You'd tout your own grandma into betting on the wrong horse—but maybe there's some kind of gyp where you'd draw the line?"

Morelli laughed softly. "Don't bet on it, copper . . . That Connie!" He uttered the name softly. "What a gal! But why she married a dumb flattie instead of— Why, I could have given her more than you'll ever see in your whole life."

"Yeah." Donegan smiled easily. "She knew that, too."

Morelli laughed again, and shrugged. The elevator had come to a creaking halt and they strode down the corridor, unlocked Room 317 and went in together.

The gale was rising. The windows of the small room clattered with a steady sound like machine-gun fire. The very walls of the small hotel seemed to shudder as if under the impact of a gigantic fist that battered it from all sides. The whining howl had grown now to an angry roar. Suddenly, at a splintering crash somewhere below, Donegan and his prisoner peered down at the street together—at the overturned benches in the sodden safety zone; at the whipped palm trees, looking now like mops, bending east; at the flapping store signs and the blown debris.

"Getting bad. We better hurry."

"Yeah. Only—what if we can't get transportation?" Morelli asked hopefully.

"No soap, chum. I got a car," Donegan informed him, amused. "You all packed? Ship the trunk somewhere—you won't need it up the river. . . . These Florida hurricanes, they're not so much," he scoffed. "A twister, now! I was through Gainesville,

Georgia, the day after that one hit. Bodies on every porch."

Morelli sighed, not listening. He marked an address on his trunk and clicked it shut, then settled his hat at a jaunty angle and faced his captor.

"Okay, I'm ready. So take me in! Pass up the easiest five grand you'll ever see."

"I do all right," Donegan said cheerfully. "It's steady work."

They walked down the hall again to the elevator. This time the plainclothes man rang the bell, eyeing the other man narrowly.

"You look like you're thinking up a fast one," he growled. "Maybe I better snap the bracelets on you, just till we get to the car."

A MOMENT later, as they entered the lift, the elevator boy's eyes widened at sight of the handcuffs, linking Donegan's left wrist to Morelli's right.

"Wh-which one of you gentlemen is the—?"

"Me," Morelli and Donegan said in chorus, and winked at each other.

"Sure is blowin' out yonder," the boy mumbled. "I ain't runnin' this heah thing many mo' times. The guests can walk down—I'm leavin' out o' here before—"

At that instant the hotel rocked under a tremendous gust that seemed to prop up the building; then abruptly the support was withdrawn. There was a grinding roar as a brick wall gave way. A medley of voices became faintly audible—screaming in terror, calling to loved ones, shouting a warning or a suggestion for escape.

Bricks and mortar rained down on the descending elevator, which all at once gave a sickening lurch and dropped three floors. It jammed with a jar that shook up its occupants like peas in a box. Then the roof fell in, cascading more bricks and mortar down upon the iron cage.

The three men inside did not stir for a long time.

Then, groaning, Art Morelli sat up and rubbed a swelling lump on his head.

"Wow!" he said. "How d'you like—"

He stopped, grunting at the sight of the two figures sprawled beside him.

The elevator boy's eyes were wide and glazed, his neck broken. But Donegan was still breathing, and presently he stirred and sat up dizzily. He blinked at the man still handcuffed to his wrist, then doubled up in a paroxysm of coughing. Blood foamed between his lips, and he clutched at the other man weakly, his eyes scared.

"I'm . . . hurt. Busted rib," he wheezed painfully. "Think it . . . punctured something."

Morelli braced him erect gently. Then, slowly, a foxlike expression spread over his face that made the detective fumble swiftly for the gun in his pocket.

"No you don't, chum!" Donegan grinned feebly. "I'm not hurt that . . . bad . . ."

He swayed but caught himself. But not before Art Morelli, the gambler, the opportunist, had snatched the automatic from his hand and the other from his pocket. His black eyes were hard and bright, like onyx.

"Now," he drawled. "The chips are all on *my* side of the table. So let's have that handcuff key, wherever you put it. I want these things off me! Right now!"

Donegan smiled at him; his eyes were blurred. "Why?" he asked in a quiet voice. "You'll have to kill me, you know, to get out of here in the clear. And . . . murder? . . . Connie," he added softly, "couldn't be that wrong about you, chum. Not that wrong."

Morelli snorted. "Don't give me any soft soap! Why, I could slug you so nobody'd ever know you didn't get killed when we . . ." His voice trailed off, but his mouth curled in scorn at his own hesitation. "All right! So

maybe I don't want a murder rap hanging over me. But—"

The black eyes brightened all at once, lighting up with a swift idea. "Look, Donegan," he offered, "I'll toss you for that key." He rummaged for a coin, flipped it in the air and caught it expertly. "Heads you never saw me before, when they dig us out of here. Tails, I'm your pigeon . . . Come on, flatfoot! Is it a bet?"

The plainclothes man grinned at him, rubbing his chin. "You'd bet on . . . anything, wouldn't you?" he wheezed. "You'll come along quiet? Even if they take me to a hospital, you won't try to run out on me? All right," he nodded, gasping and clutching at his chest. "It's a . . . a bet, chum. You've got the drop on me anyhow, so what can I lose? Remember, I didn't promise not to . . . start after you again . . . as soon as . . ."

He broke off, coughing and gagging on bloody foam even as Morelli flipped the silver quarter high in the air. It landed on an edge and rolled half under the dead elevator boy's shoulder. Morelli lifted the limp arm swiftly to see what it was, bending forward eagerly. Donegan, too, leaned forward to look but he toppled forward on his face. He lay there, unmoving, until Art Morelli stretched out a hand to help him up.

THE gambler drew back his hand slowly, with a sharp grunt of surprise. Almost gently he rolled the detective over face up on the elevator floor, staring at him with mingled emotions. There was an odd expression on Donegan's homely, composed features. His unseeing eyes were half open, his lips parted as though, even in death, he were about to laugh aloud in mocking triumph.

Art Morelli's grin came back. He fumbled quickly through the dead man's pockets for the handcuff key, found it, then pulled out the detective's wallet and extracted the small roll of bills therein.

"Thanks, chum," he said aloud, his

voice sounding hollow and strange in the silent elevator. "You won't be needing this, and I will, since I didn't get that call through to Hialeah." He started to return the empty wallet.

On impulse, however, he flipped it open to stare at a snapshot in the celluloid cover; a picture of a sweet-faced girl with a plump, crowing baby in her arms. Morelli's eye brightened. Connie! She was free now. And she'd be lonesome and bewildered—in a little while she'd probably welcome him. She still liked him; even Donegan had admitted that. Said she thought he wasn't crooked all the way . . . He could do a lot with an angle like that, with a girl like Connie!

Narrowed with anticipation, his hard eyes drifted again to the silver quarter glinting on the floor between Donegan's cheek and the elevator boy's shoulder. Morelli bent to look at it closed in the half-light, picking it up with his handcuffed hand from which Donegan's arm flopped limply.

The gambler frowned at the coin slowly.

It was tails.

He pursed his lips, one black eyebrow lifted ironically, and returned the quarter to his pocket. Then, deliberately, he replaced Donegan's wallet—minus Donegan's roll and the snapshot of Donegan's wife. His frown deepened.

At that moment, voices began shouting encouragement from somewhere above—shaky voices of those who had survived the hurricane and were now bending their efforts toward digging out those trapped in the wreckage of fallen buildings.

"Anybody down there?" a man's voice called.

"Yeah!" Morelli shouted back eagerly. "Two dead, one survivor. Get me out of here, will you?"

"Right away! Hey, Joe. Bring me a blowtorch," the distant voice called.

Art Morelli grunted, tossing the handcuff key on his palm. He scowled at Donegan's still features, which were set in a peculiar smile of triumph.

"You go to hell!" Morelli snarled at him. "What are you grinning about, you dumb flatfoot?" Once again he glowered at the handcuff key, and snorted. "Helluva bet!" he muttered. "Two to six years . . . Ah-h! A guy could do a rap like that standing on his head!"

He smiled suddenly at Donegan's set face, flapping the limp arm handcuffed to his own. Then he gave the detective a flippant little salute.

"All right, copper, so you won! You and Connie . . ." he drawled aloud in the silent elevator. "I never welshed on a bet in my life, and I'm sure not gonna start on a dead man! But as Connie says, I'm a very weak character!" He laughed softly. "This is so I can't talk myself out of it!"

Almost nonchalantly Art Morelli poked the handcuff key through the elevator grating, hearing it fall with a musical clink to the floor of the shaft.

Then, with a flourish, he pilfered a pack of cigarettes from the elevator boy's body, started to return it, but thrust it into his pocket instead with a hard grin. Lighting up, he leaned back comfortably against the elevator wall, to wait until his rescuers dug him out of the wrecked hotel and turned him over to the local police.



Murder's Crystal Ball

By Nicholas Zook

Everything happened on Flanagan's beat—he really needed a fortune teller to keep him straight. And then he ran into a horoscope artist who knew more about murder than he did about the stars.



IT WAS opium, the stuff that sends men climbing to a better world and then drags them down to a hell of torture. Somehow the federal narcotics agents traced the opium to an area about half a mile in radius. There the trail ended and they couldn't find the distributor.

Why should a plain cop worry about narcotics? As a rule, I didn't.

But this time it was different. That half-mile area was within my beat and until the distributor was found the narcotics men would haunt that beat.

The federal men put on seedy disguises and took rooms along the beat. It got so I couldn't tell if the bum I told to move along was a federal man or a bum. But the stuff kept

seeping out. Whoever was behind it had a foolproof way of dishing the opium out. And Sergeant Mulrooney, my superior, didn't like it.

I found him in his little cubicle of a room at the station. His face was beet-red and dented with deep lines of worry. He grunted when I came in and left me standing before the desk.

"You wanted to see me, sergeant?"

He savagely bit into a cigar, spewed the end on the floor and applied a match. He didn't answer until the air was filled with rapid clouds of smoke, rising like SOS signals.

"Flanagan, your beat has given this precinct a black eye," he thundered. "How do you think it looks to the old man when these federal agents have to move in to clean up your territory?"

I thought that over carefully. "They could be wrong," I said simply. "Maybe the opium isn't coming from my beat."

"Maybe today isn't Saturday," he sneered. He wagged the cigar in his mouth and exhaled another series of smoke clouds. "Look, Flanagan, I'll lay it on the line. Find the dope peddler before those federal men do and I'll recommend you for the promotion that's open."

I brightened. "Don't get him and you might find it a good idea to go to a barber's college and get yourself another trade," he continued with a glower. My chin fell almost to the middle button of my coat.

I was on my best behavior that Saturday night. I rattled doors, prowled around back alleys and trailed a half-dozen suspicious-looking characters. The beat seemed unusually quiet for a Saturday night and it had me a little worried.

I dawdled by the Rainbow Tavern, mulling over Sergeant Mulrooney's threat when I heard the shriek. It was a cry of pain, of anguish. It came from a dingy room over the tavern. I stood with my back to the stairway leading to the room, waiting for another sound.

Someone hurtled down the stairs and toppled me over. I gasped to get my breath and found a white-faced character named Arthur Haire sprawled beside me on the pavement. He lifted a lily-white hand to his head and fingered what might have been a bump.

He gave me a startled look. "Sorry," he said. "Upstairs. There's a fight. Better get up there."

HE WAS on his feet and down the street before I could stop him. I whipped out my pistol and clambered up the stairs. This might be the break I was looking for. It wasn't.

It was a dingy room with a poker table in the center and loose cards scattered over it. Three men were huddled over a limp figure on the floor. They gaped at my uniform and looked as though they were going to run. I stopped that with a flourish of my pistol. When I had them lined up against the wall, I turned my attention to the prostrate figure.

He was Mike Miller, a small-time gambler. His open mouth and look of surprise on his relaxed face told me as much as the open wound in his chest. Mike Miller would no longer cut cards in this world. He was dead.

I pounded the floor with my club until the bartender came up. It would have been more to my liking to get the story from the three gents and wind up the case single-handed. But regulations are regulations. The bartender called the station and ten minutes later the Homicide Squad breezed in.

Once the boys in plain clothes got there I was shoved away in the back-ground. I could have gone back to my beat without being missed but I wanted to hear the full story.

A couple of hundred bucks cost Mike Miller his life. There had been a small-time poker game and the deceased gent, who had never done an honest day's work in his life, was doing all the winning. Maybe it was a

coincidence that he won the big pots whenever he dealt. Most likely it wasn't.

Mike had dealt himself a winning hand and was pulling in the cash when Arthur Haire stopped him and said Mike had dealt from the bottom. Haire was a professional card sharp who wasn't used to losing or being outsmarted.

Mike did what any honest gent would do when insulted. He poked a fist across the table and hit Haire on the snoot. Haire went down but came up fighting. Fighting with fire in his eyes and a long knife in his hand.

A minute later Mike Miller groaned his last with four inches of steel blade buried in his chest.

Haire didn't waste any time after that. He scooped up the money on the table, threatened the three witnesses with mayhem if they squawked to the cops, and lammed.

The three witnesses signed sworn statements that Arthur Haire had jabbed Mike with a knife. It was an open and shut case for Homicide. Open and shut except for one thing. Arthur Haire couldn't be found. He left no traces, no clues, no nothing. And somehow the fact that Haire had toppled me over on the pavement had leaked out.

SERGEANT MULROONEY had me on the carpet for half an hour Monday. He chewed a mangy stub of a cigar and glowered at me under his shaggy, gray eyebrows. I shot him an uneasy smile. The lines on his face were as deep as miniature canyons.

"You might have caught him red-handed," he sighed. "You had him flat on his back and let him get up and run away."

"How was I to know what was going on?" I objected.

"You knew where Haire lived and might have gone there after you heard the details about the killing," he snarled. "A fat lot of good you are on the beat. A man is murdered

and you let the murderer slip through your fingers. Then you don't check on his room."

He leaned forward angrily. "Now we not only have the federal narcotics men prowling your beat but the Homicide Bureau as well. Homicide is mad at us, the chief is mad at us and the newspapers say we look the other way when something criminal happens. And why? Because you, Flanagan, haven't any more sense than an ox."

"But sergeant, his landlady said he never showed up there after the knifing, anyway. He just up and disappeared," I protested.

"Just went up in smoke like a blinking magician, eh?" He jabbed a finger in my direction. "More likely he's hiding right under your nose and you're too fat-headed to spot him. The alarm was broadcast half an hour after Haire killed Miller and he couldn't have slipped out of the city without being caught. I tell you, Flanagan, if you can't do any better, I'll—I'll send you back to the traffic division."

That scared me. All I could say was, "Aw, Sarge."

Back on my beat that night, I decided to try my hand at some sleuthing. If I outsmarted the Homicide Bureau by pulling in Haire, it would be a feather in my cap. I paid a visit to Haire's rooming house.

Haire's landlady, Mrs. Penelope Fagin, wasn't much help. She was a tight-lipped old battleaxe whose stock phrase was, "I don't know nuthin'."

"He paid me reg'lar for the room and acted like a perfect gentleman," she croaked. "Besides that, I don't know nuthin'."

She grumbled under her breath when I asked to take a gander at the things Haire had left behind him. She stomped up the stairs to the third floor, wheezing and grumbling, and threw the door of a room open.

There was nothing of importance there. Some clothes, a couple of suit-

eases, some photographs, toilet articles and a bundle of envelopes marked "Horoscope for Capricorn."

After half an hour of subtle questioning, I found out from Mrs. Fagin that Haire wasn't a chummy guy and kept pretty much to himself. The only person that he had more than a nodding acquaintance with was Swami Ali Ghan, a Hindu mumbo-jumbo guy in a nearby apartment house. The Swami's racket was astrology and charting horoscopes for a small fee. That accounted for the dozen horoscope pamphlets in Haire's room.

THE Swami was one of the more colorful persons on the beat. He wore a coiled turban, an ankle-length robe and whiskers that covered his face like a veil. He never bothered anybody and there had been no complaints against him so I closed my eyes to the fact that his business was outside the law.

I ambled over to his place, one of eight apartments in a brick block. He answered my knock by opening the door about a foot and pushing his face through. I could see my uniform scared him.

"I want to talk to you," I said. "Can I come in?"

Grudgingly he opened the door wide enough for me to squeeze through, then he closed it behind me. I found myself in a sitting room, lit by a dim overhanging light with a cracked globe.

There were few furnishings, a studio couch, a couple of straight chairs and a big, round table in the middle of the room. A chart and a pile of books were scattered on the table. It was one of those Zodiac charts with animals and strange writings around a big circle.

The Swami eyed me with suspicion. I took my time looking around the room and studying the chart on the table.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Patrolman?" His voice was nothing more than a hoarse whisper.

"I'm looking for a guy named Arthur Haire," I said bluntly. "I understand he came to your place a couple of times. Is that right?"

His eyes widened. "Yes, he came here to get some readings on his future," he stammered in his whisper. "That is all."

I frowned. Haire didn't seem the kind of guy who would go in for junk like reading the stars. Reading the cards was more in his line. Yet there were the horoscopes in his apartment and now the statement of the Swami.

"Just what did you tell him his future would be?" I asked curiously.

"Professional ethics do not permit me to disclose that confidence," he said, drawing himself up to his full height.

I stared at the guy in amusement and shrugged. "Okay, Swami, it doesn't matter. Did you know him well?"

"No, just as a client."

He sounded frightened. I nodded and studied the wrinkled hands by his sides. He was nervously clenching and unclenching his fists. I got to thinking about that and about the way his eyes opened wide when I mentioned Haire.

Right under my nose, the sergeant had said. I toyed with the idea. Maybe he was right. Maybe Arthur Haire had put on some false whiskers, a turban and a robe. What better disguise could he have? In a rig like that nobody could tell him from the real article.

Maybe that was Arthur Haire. He might have persuaded his friend, the Swami, to leave town while he pulled an impersonation.

The silence made the Swami more nervous. He cocked his head, tilting his beard at an angle. I smiled and edged nearer.

"Could you make out my future, Swami?" I asked. "At the regular price, of course."

He stiffened. "I read the stars only for my friends. It is out of the question."

"Was Haire a friend of yours, then?"

I had him there. He hesitated, then nodded. "In a way, yes."

"Maybe you could tell me where he is now, Swami," I suggested, edging nearer. "Maybe you know where he is now."

I leaped, pinning both his arms behind him and bowling him to the floor. We fell together, with me on top.

TERROR was in his eyes as I straddled his chest and firmly gripped his beard. I tugged gently and it didn't give. With a knowing wink I tugged more fiercely. Nothing happened. I gave a last desperate heave and my heart sank.

The Swami howled in pain. His clenched fists beat against my chest and his feet kicked behind me. His turban tumbled from his head and I saw his bald, pink head, wet with perspiration. Guiltily I remembered Haire was not bald.

I stammered a quick apology and made a retreat to the door. As I slipped out, I could see the Swami holding his chin with both hands and rocking back and forth in pain. I shuddered at his unearthly howling.

That ended my sleuthing for the night.

The next afternoon I was back on the familiar carpet. Sergeant Mulrooney peered at me with a false smile and slowly lit his cigar. He flicked his match to the floor and leered.

"Quiet night last night, Flanagan?"

Uneasily I shifted from one foot to the other and nodded. "Sure, Sarge, very quiet."

"Good," he purred. I breathed more easily, thinking maybe he had not heard about the Swami business. I was wrong.

"So quiet you gotta go and pull an old man's whiskers," he roared. "A poor, defenseless old gent who never did anybody any harm. Why, Flanagan, why?"

I grinned sheepishly. "Well, I figured . . ." My voice petered out.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you," he interrupted with a shake of his head. "Next thing, you'll be taking lollipops away from kids."

"Well, I figured . . ."

"You figured," he stormed. "Well, don't do any more figuring. I had to talk fast to keep that guy from suing the department. If I get just one more teeny-weeny complaint about you, Flanagan, out you go on your ear. Now get out of here and remember—no more beard pulling."

Meekly I tiptoed out, wondering why I had ever wanted to become a cop. And wondering also how long I would remain one.

I had to redeem myself or go out on my ear so my sleuthing went on. I bought Mrs. Fagin a bottle of gin to cement our friendship. She cackled with glee at the gift and took a healthy swig straight from the bottle.

"Mrs. Fagin, where are Haire's things now?" I smiled.

Clutching her gin bottle, she stomped through a long corridor and led me to a room that occupied the whole rear of the first floor. It had an outer door leading down to the alley.

"Here you are," she said with a hiccough.

I gazed at mounds of dust-covered suitcases, furniture and loose paraphernalia.

"You mean all these things are his?"

She cackled and playfully poked me in the ribs. "No. This is my storeroom. I charge my tenants and anybody else with something to store for the room. Gotta make an honest penny somehow with prices as high as they are," she explained.

I recognized Haire's suitcases in a corner. Near them lay a number of rolled-up canvas charts. They looked familiar, too familiar.

"Does the Swami store stuff in here?" I asked.

"Him and half the people in the neighborhood," she croaked. "The apartments are small and they gotta put their extra stuff some place. So they come to me."

SHE toddled back to her room with the gin and I left to pound my beat. I figured maybe Haire would

character with a big, black mustache was snooping around Tony's fruit store and copped an apple. I clamped my hands on him and started for the station when he hissed a warning. I looked closer and recognized one of the federal narcotics agents. I quickly let him go.

I had forgotten about the opium peddler who was operating on the beat. Between that and Arthur Haire



return to pick up his things. I was like a drowning man clutching at a straw, but I had nothing else to work on. The discouraging thing about it was that Haire's things weren't very valuable, hardly worth coming back for.

I mapped my beat out so I could try the back door of the room maybe once an hour. It seemed a waste of time but I had nothing to lose.

The week was quiet. I made only one near-pinch. A suspicious-looking

I had plenty to keep my eyes peeled for.

I saw the Swami more often than I wished. He swept past me like a haughty prima donna with his eyes straight in front of him. Neither one of us spoke.

Another Saturday night rolled around and I was getting discouraged. I was convinced that Arthur Haire was indeed a magician and had disappeared into thin air. City and state police, including Homicide,

had uncovered no trace of him.

I made up my mind to pass the whole thing off as a bad job and try to live the business down. Maybe even Mulrooney would forget about it in time.

About a quarter to eleven I sauntered around the back of Mrs. Fagin's house to give it a final check. It was getting so I knew where every stone and ash can lay back there. Halfway down the alley, my heart flipfopped with hope. An orange light showed through the dusty window pane.

Stealthily I made my way around the ash cans. I crept up the four stairs to the door and cautiously peered through the windows. I had raised my hopes for nothing. It was not Haire but the Swami within the room. He had a legitimate right to be there and I was not anxious for another meeting with him. Mulrooney's warning had been too stern to ignore.

With disappointed eyes I watched the Swami search a mound of luggage. His white hands prodded the odd collection of luggage until they encountered one of the zodiac charts. He lifted it and set it to one side.

His hands probed again and found a familiar object. It was a bundle of horoscopes that I had seen among Haire's things. Since they had originally belonged to the Swami, I had no objection if he pilfered them. I turned to go.

Suddenly the image of those hands struck a responsive chord in my mind. That chord made the whole plot crystal clear. I returned to the window and peered once more. I was right. I knew I was right. I seized the doorknob and stormed through.

The Swami straightened with alarm at my entrance. When he recognized me, even his beard could not hide the amused leer that twisted his lips.

"We meet again," he said in his hoarse whisper. But this time I would not make the same mistake.

I STARED hard at his eyes. They were wide and abnormally bright, fierce and unreal. There was about him a detached air, something unusual and somehow frightening. Then I realized—opium. The stuff that kills fear and makes a swaggering champion out of the meekest coward.

I had my pistol in my hand, carefully trained on his stomach. That bearded face did not lose its leer.

"All right," I said quietly. "I don't make the same mistake twice. This time there won't be any running away."

His hands still clutched the dozen elastic-bound copies of horoscopes. The flick of his hand was quick, too quick for my startled reflexes. The bundle caught my gun square on the barrel and twisted the weapon from my grasp.

The bearded figure moved fast. A knife with a four inch blade slipped from the loose folds of the robe and was suddenly in his grip. He towered above me, a pouncing avalanche of flesh.

The knife cut the air with the whistle of a whip. I dove headlong into a corner of the room to escape the angry slash. Perspiration broke out on my forehead. That blow would have cut me open as neatly as the belly of a mackerel at the hands of a fishmonger.

The brilliant eyes gleamed with anger and the leering mouth permitted a growl to pass. He stepped slowly forward, his knife poised for the finishing blow, his body crouched expectantly.

I braced my knees against a suitcase and sent it hurtling across the floor with a desperate kick. The case scuttled against his legs and tripped him. He fell forward with a cry and I could hear a sickening thud as his head struck the floor.

I leaped to my feet and dove before he could recover his balance. I whipped out my club and tapped his wrist. He uttered a cry of pain and

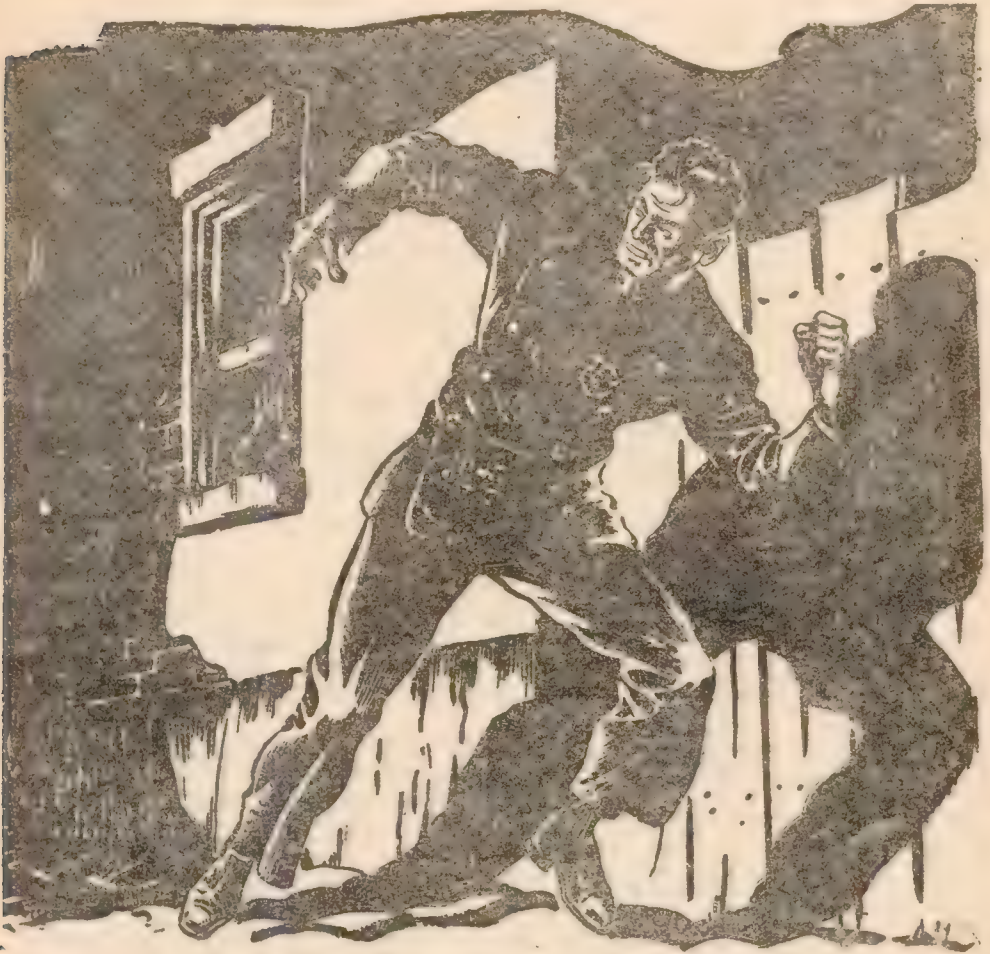
released the knife. I tapped his head less gently and he closed his eyes. They stayed closed for well over an hour.

When I recovered my breath, I gave one firm pull at his whiskers. As I expected, they came off. It was Haire, all right. Without the whiskers the face paint could not con-

the Homicide Bureau and the federal narcotics men. Cleaned up both their cases with absolutely no help. With my help, Flanagan, you'll have your promotion in no time. Now tell me how you doped it out."

I gave a deprecating laugh.

"Well, I figured — er — I deduced Haire thought of the Swami, his one



ceal his features. A half hour later the sergeant and I picked up the Swami and closed the case.

An hour later I was in the sergeant's office. This time he let me sit down and even forced one of his nickel cigars on me.

"Good work," he said, slapping me on the back. "We slipped one over on

friend, after he killed Mike Miller. He had nowhere else to turn. So he rushed to his apartment and forced the Swami to keep him under cover.

"Why? Well, the Swami didn't help Haire out of pure friendship. He was distributing opium through his horoscopes. Haire was one of his customers. We'd have known sooner if we

had taken apart the horoscope envelopes that Haire had in his room. Within a compartment in each envelope was a pinch or two of opium.

"As I see it, the Swami got his shipments along with his horoscopes. He distributed the opium to his carefully picked clientele by giving them phony horoscope readings. Star-reading was a blind and a good one. At least it had the federal men fooled. Haire knew all this and threatened to squeal unless the Swami helped him out.

"Both men were about the same build. It was safe for Haire to dress like the Swami and get out once in a while. He couldn't have been in a safer place, especially after I pulled that boner of tugging at the Swami's whiskers.

"Tonight, bolstered by opium, Haire figured on making his getaway

by wearing the fake Swami rig. So he tried to pick up his things, particularly the opium he still had stashed in the horoscope envelopes.

"He had me fooled until I spotted his hands through the window. They weren't wrinkled with age like the Swami's. Instead, they were long, white and smooth, with freshly trimmed nails. They looked just like what they were, a gambler's hands that hadn't seen work in years. I knew it wasn't the Swami, so I stopped him. And he gave himself away."

Mulrooney chewed his cigar and smiled thoughtfully. "Nice work, Flanagan," he said. "You might say Haire was within a whisker of getting away."

He roared with laughter. I choked on the cigar and joined in weakly. I felt I had to. The traffic division still didn't appeal to me.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946

of 10-Story Detective Magazine, published bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass. for October 1, 1948.

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the 10-Story Detective Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, A. A. Wyn, 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, A. A. Wyn, 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, A. A. Wyn, 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.

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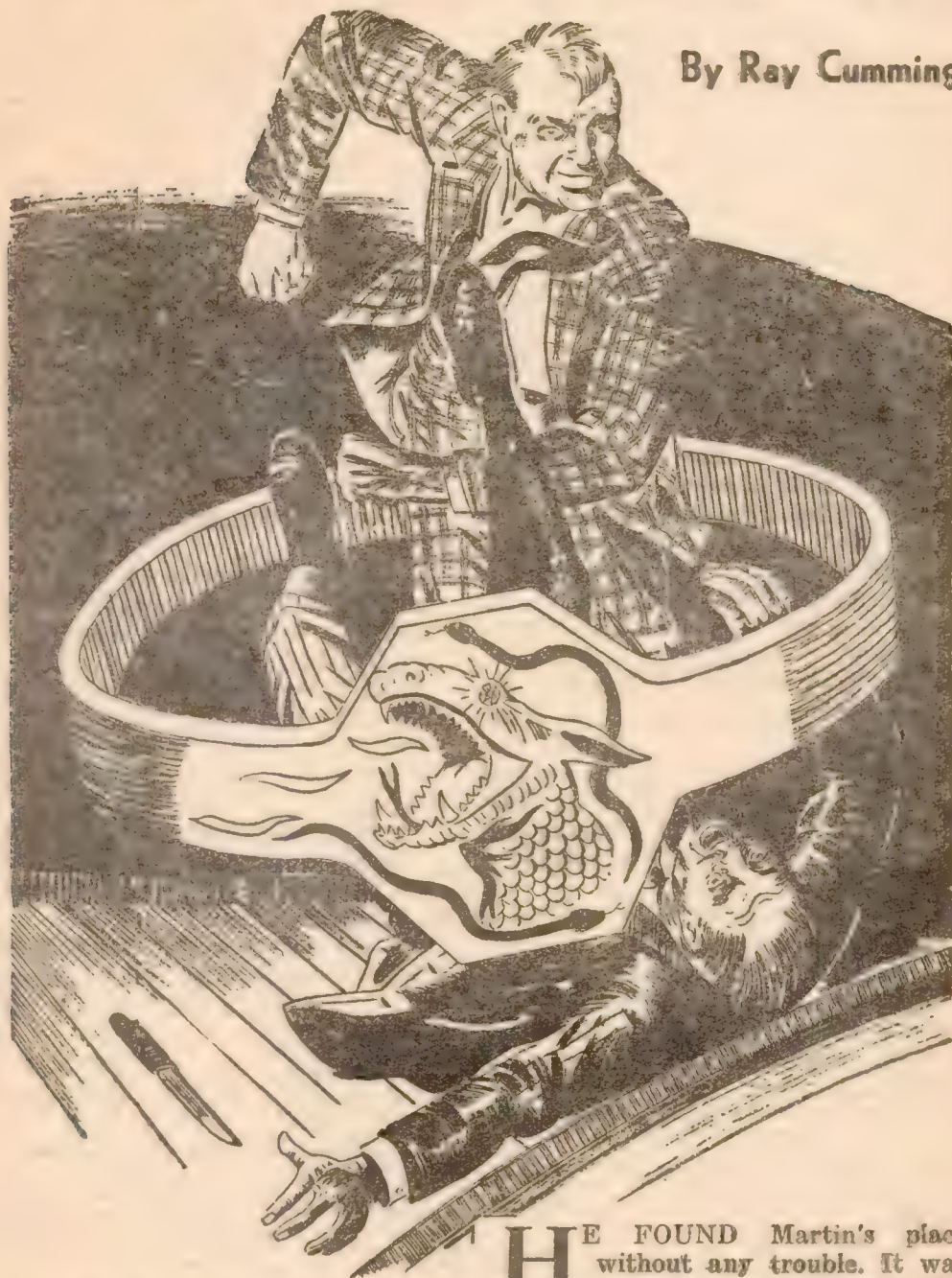
A. A. WYN, Publisher

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 28rd day of September, 1948.

SHIRLEE NANSIN, Notary Public
Commission expires March 30, 1950.

You'll Die Laughing

By Ray Cummings



**Full of magic and tricks,
that shop was a place
you'd expect to laugh in—
not die in!**

HE FOUND Martin's place without any trouble. It was a small frame building, nearly the last one on the block, with a vacant lot on each side of it and one across the street. The sign read: **FUN SHOP, James Martin, Prop.**

Big Red Brackett smiled sourly. Martin had always been a queer duck. He'd found a queer business for himself, but it was making money, that was the important thing.

The little house was dark; there was just a glow of light behind the lower front windows which Brackett figured would be the shop. The shades were drawn, the place was closed to customers, now well after midnight. But little Martin knew he was coming. And Martin would be alone here; he had said his wife and two kids were in the country for a while, during the hot weather.

On the narrow front door of the shop there was a neat sign. *Come In And Be Amused*. Brackett chuckled to himself. His visit wasn't because he wanted amusement. Yet in a way it was amusing to see Martin squirm.

Brackett turned the knob and opened the door. It moaned like something dying; and as he took a step inside, a sharp little puff of wind blew off his crumpled hat.

The shop was dimly lighted with a sheen that was a strangely flat dead-gray. Brackett picked up his hat, gazed around uncertainly at the small showcases, the shelves lined with the gadgets Martin sold. To one side there was a table and a couple of chairs.

Martin evidently was behind a screen over in a corner. He said, "Oh—you, Red. Sit down. Just fixing something. Be with you in a minute."

Red Brackett sat down. The chair legs slid apart and it groaned as it collapsed under him. When he scrambled up, the chair sprang together again.

"I don't call this funny," Brackett growled. "You greet all your customers like this?"

"Yes—and they love it. They bring their friends so that they can laugh at them."

Little Martin came from behind the screen, and the sight of him made Brackett tense. In the flat, dead light Martin's thin face was livid green.

His eyeballs glistened like phosphorescence. His fingernails were like glowing, opalescent shells. He looked like a grinning ghoul out of a nightmare.

"Take a look at yourself," Martin chuckled. "You look the same way." A wall mirror reflected Brackett's own grisly image. "My stroboscopic light," Martin said. "Queer, eh? It wows 'em."

HE SNAPPED the light off. A normal yellow glow came from the ceiling bulbs and Martin looked himself again—a meek little man with thin sandy hair and pale blue eyes. He was quite evidently trying to make everything friendly and jolly. Because he was going to stall again, Brackett figured. And he could tell that underneath, Martin was nervous, tense.

"Sit down," Martin said.

"Don't make me laugh," Brackett growled. "I tell you this silly stuff isn't funny."

"Oh, it won't throw you, not this time. Try it."

Gingerly Brackett sat down. The chair, having sprung apart once, now held together.

"I sell a lot of those chairs," Martin said. "You'd be surprised." He sat down in another chair, and the table was between them.

"Okay, let's have it," Brackett said gruffly. "Two hundred this time, and no monkey business, trying to talk me into less."

Blackmail is a very simple thing when you fall into the right setup. James Martin had been Brackett's pal, back in the old days. Their activities had been somewhat outside the law. Luck had been with them in their first small jobs, engineered by Brackett because Martin was only a kid then and did what he was told. Then luck had turned. In a burglary, Martin had been caught and had taken the rap. A policeman had been shot, and unfortunately he died.

All that was more than ten years

ago. Martin had served only a couple of years, and then had escaped. Red Brackett was still a wanted man; but it was so long ago that the affair was all but forgotten now.

For years Brackett had been a drifter, batting around with everything seemingly against him. Then just a month ago, by chance he had bumped into Martin. The new name hadn't fooled Brackett. He recognized his pal who in the old days had been little Jim Maloney.

Martin, as he called himself now, had been on the level with the law since he had escaped from the pen. He had a wife and kids now—a wife who didn't know about his past, who was an active church worker with a lot of friends. And Martin had his little business, prosperous enough to keep things going comfortably.

It was a perfect setup. The last thing in the world Martin wanted was to have his family wrecked, disgraced, and himself tossed back into the pen. And so the blackmail had started. Brackett was clever. Just a little at first—only a loan of fifty bucks. Then a little more, and more. There were times when Martin didn't have the sum Brackett demanded. He had given up his watch, that first time. Then later, a stickpin, with a little diamond in it. Blackmail is an insidious thing. It starts small; it rolls up like a snowball. Martin's wife's modest jewelry had gone. Most of it, anyway; and Martin had told her that he was in temporary financial trouble, and he was going to have to pawn it.

Lately, Brackett's demands had been pretty heavy. Perhaps too heavy, he was realizing now. Across the table from him, Martin looked nervous and frightened.

"Look, Red," he said. "You know I've done my best. Once in a while I've needed a little time—"

Red Brackett stared blankly. He wasn't going to get the two hundred, certainly not tonight. "How much you

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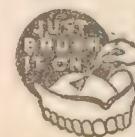


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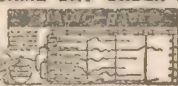
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got?" he demanded.

Little Martin was twisting his fingers, squirming. "Well, that's just it. I've done my best. I—"

BRACKETT'S scowling gaze of cupid flung around the dim shop. If only the little guy had some jewelry for sale here, he would take it. In one of the showcases there was a display of rings. But they were just trick rings, gaudy and tinny, with colored glass to look like jewels in them. Stuff worth maybe a buck or two. There was a ring on Martin's finger. Maybe just a phony one, but it looked more valuable than those in the case.

Martin saw his glance. "I've given you about everything I have, Red. Now listen, if you'll give me a little more time—"

"That ring you got," Brackett interjected gruffly.

"Oh that—well—"

"Maybe you want me to think it's just one of that trick phony stuff," Brackett said and flung a glance at the showcase. "Like those, but it sure doesn't look it."

"Well, you—" Then Martin sighed and slipped it off his finger. "Maybe it'll fit you, Red."

It did. It was heavy; maybe worth ten bucks, twenty. Maybe more. You never could tell about stuff like that. It seemed carved of gold. The center of it was a big dragon head; eyes that maybe were ruby chips. Down the sides of the gold circlet there were twined serpents, with glittering green eyes. Brackett held out his hand.

"Okay. Sure it fits me." He chuckled. "Anything fits me, that's got any money in it. Now about some cash. If you think you can stall me, just with this . . ."

That's what Martin had tried to do, of course. He sat with his thin face apprehensive.

"I—I can raise it, but not just now," he stammered. "Red, I tell you I've tried my best."

"The hell you have."

"I have. My wife and kids—they need things." Suddenly he seemed trying to conquer his fear. His voice lost its whine. "Blackmail is a pretty dangerous thing, Red. I guess you know that. We could both go to the pen, if that's what you want."

So that was it! Brackett was startled. Would the little guy be desperate and fool enough to do that?

Martin's eyes were very queerly gleaming. "I could do it, Red," he added. "This blackmail—and the cops being after you for that past stuff—"

"The devil they are."

"You'd find out quick enough, if we—if we start digging things up. I wasn't the one who shot that cop, Red. You know it. You know it was you who—"

His look was so queer, the little twitching smile at the corners of his mouth was so queer! A sudden startling fear shot into Brackett. Maybe little Martin was planning something now? Maybe he had already done something?

Brackett had leaped out of his seat, glaring around the dim little room. "You—what you getting at? You come across with that money—or your wife and kids have seen the last of you."

"Maybe so, Red. Maybe not." It seemed that Martin was strangely short of breath, as though his heart was racing. As though he expected something to happen now. "You better go now," Martin added. "Yes, that's it. Go ahead. I—I'll see you again. We'll talk about this—some other time."

Red Brackett was puzzled. What was Martin getting at? What had he done?

"We'll talk about it now," Brackett muttered. He had backed up against one of the showcases—burly and glowering as he stared down at his little adversary.

"No. Some other time. Not tonight. You better beat it fast, Red. I'm warning you—"

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Threatening him! The room was whirling around Red Brackett. He could feel the sweat breaking out on him with his rush of fear. The black-mail was at an end, that was obvious. And the little rat was planning some trickery. A rush of incoherent thoughts, dominated by fear and anger, surged at him so that he cursed under his breath.

"Why, you—you damned little—"

"Go on—beat it out of here, Red!"

IT WAS then that Red Brackett was aware of the knife. It lay on the showcase here almost at his elbow. His hand reached and seized it. In the blur of the scene before him there was only Martin's thin face with its twisted smile.

Then Brackett leaped. Martin saw him coming, saw the knife and he jumped to his feet. He gasped, "Why—why Red—wait! Let's talk this over . . ."

He tried to escape as the table was overturned. There was real terror in his voice now, nothing else, just an agony of terror because he knew he was going to die.

"Red, wait! Don't—I'm telling you, Red—let's talk—let's—"

The knife struck down at Martin's chest. But it was just another damn gadget around here, a trick knife with the blade sliding back into its handle so that Brackett ripped out an oath and flung it away. He hit Martin with his fist, then the other, a rain of blows, with Martin staggering back.

"Red—Red—"

Then Martin had fallen backward to the floor, with big Brackett sprawled on him and Brackett's fingers gripping at the skinny throat.

"Red, wait! You—" Now suddenly it seemed that Martin was hysterically laughing in his terror. "Why—this is funny. You—killing me—like this! Red—Red . . ."

Then his breath was gone as the throttling fingers clamped down. It was the end of him now, and the hys-

teria of his twisted smile was vanished as he could feel death plucking at him. There wasn't much noise. Just the thumping and squirming of Martin's frail body; and his upturned face with staring, popping eyes growing horrible. . . .

At last the squirming thing was motionless and Brackett leaped to his feet. The shop was a blur of swaying fantasy around him. He was covered with cold sweat; his head was pounding, his ears roaring as though a torrent of Niagara was in him. But Martin was dead, silenced forever. Brackett had always met him secretly, had never been here before because Martin's wife and kids had always been around here. There was no connection between him and Martin. No danger, if he got out of here now in a hurry.

In the blur of the swaying little shop, Red Brackett jumped for the door. He had enough presence of mind to open it cautiously, to be sure there was no one in the street outside.

The dim, tree-lined street, with the many empty lots around here, was deserted. The door of the shop groaned eerily as he closed it. He headed to the right, away from town. The open country was just beyond the empty lots. The road wound out through a path of woods.

Red Brackett staggered on. Everything seemed to sway around him. A car came along the road, the yellow beam of its headlight lurching as it rounded the bend ahead. Brackett ducked off the road, crouched in a thicket while it went past. He had a glimpse that there were women and children in the open car. He started back for the road. Or would it be better to rest here for a while?

HE SAT on a rock, with underbrush between him and the road. Around him was the dark boskiness of the deep woods. In a pond back there, frogs were croaking. That, and the cheep of insects made the back-

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ground of night-sounds. There was nothing else, except the roaring in Brackett's head and his panting, labored breath.

It was nice to rest here. He hadn't realized he was so tired. All his muscles felt queer, strained, tense. His legs ached and were cold with a strange, creeping numbness.

The trees were swaying overhead. Queer! There was no wind. His neck twitched as he tilted his head to look upward. The muscle in his neck knotted up in a paroxysm so that he gasped for breath.

A terrible fear went through Red Brackett at that instant. What was the matter with him? He tried to curse, but it was only a gasp and rattle in his throat so that his twitching hands went up to try and loosen his collar band. A horrible paroxysm was shaking him all over. He knew that he had fallen off the rock.

Now he was aware that one of his hands was swelling. His fingers were puffed. That damn ring that Martin had given him—he was conscious now that there was a pinpoint of pain under it, like a little stabbing fire. With a frantic curse he tried to get the ring off his fiery swollen finger, but it wouldn't come.

And now Brackett understood! Oh it was a trick ring, all right, like those in the showcase, only not so phony! Martin had wanted him to take it, of course. Ironical that his own greed had demanded it! And in the fight, his blows into Martin's face had pressed the dragonhead, so that the tiny poisoned needle, unnoticed, had jabbed him!

It was Martin's desperate plan to rid himself of his blackmailer! Now Martin's last hysterical words as he felt himself being strangled came into Brackett's blurring mind... *Why, this is funny—you killing me...*

In the dark bushes back from the empty road, Red Brackett lay twitching on the ground until presently his senses faded into the abyss of death.

REMINDER

(Courtesy Mother Nature.)

THE TURN OF SUMMER into fall is Nature's most poignant reminder of another year gone by.

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